

THE IMPACT OF THE RECENT FORCED MIGRATION CRISIS ON MUSLIM EUROPEAN IDENTITY

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Before I can describe the impact of the recent migration crisis on Muslim European identities, I would like to offer what is, in my eyes, essential background information about the previous status quo and situation of Muslims in Europe, and especially in Germany. This is why I start

(1) Firstly, by presenting some demographic facts about Muslims in Germany in general, even though it will only be a brief overview.

(2) I think the situation in Germany is also representative about the situation in Europe as well. Respectively, I will speak more precisely about the formation of Muslim identities.

(3) Then, I will give some data about the refugees and speak about the impact of their emergence on Muslim identities.

(4) Finally, I will talk about what the current situation of the refugees can mean for Islamic-Christian Dialogue in Germany. I will specifically speak about opportunities for, challenges with, and the possibility of the modification of Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Germany.

(1) Muslims in Germany

Germany has a population of about 80 million people. An estimated 4.3 million of them are Muslims, which equates to 4-5% of the population. According to a study in 2008, the denominations are as follows: 74,1% Sunni, 7,1% Shiite, 12,7% Alevi, 1,8% Ahmadi, and 4% Others. There are more than 2,400 mosques, and about 180 mosque buildings (prayer spaces). Broken down by nationality, the largest group is Turkish, followed by Arabic speaking people especially from Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, also from Afghanistan, Iran, Bosnia, and few from Africa.

Against this background, I will now try to draw picture of Muslims in Germany and the current situation regarding their position in German society and their religious identity.

(2) Muslim Identities

With reference to Muslims in Germany, I want to mention the most important factors which have shaped and are still shaping their identities. Even though we are speaking about Muslims as a starting point, we should keep in mind that “Muslim” is simply a signifier that represents a wide-ranging cultural and linguistic diversity. Rather, referring to what I have just mentioned about the composition of the Muslim population, we should be aware that there is no monolithic block, but a multitude of different cultures. This means that the self-image of every Muslim is informed by various sources. Two sources are especially essential for Muslim identities: one source is their home culture or that of their parents. This said, one has to consider, that these cultural codes and narratives might match up with the codes and narratives people use in their homeland. Therefore, the *construct* which people with origins in Turkey call their “Turkish culture” is rather *an idea* of what people believe to be “Turkish”.

However, it appears not only to be influenced by whatever the second or third generations of “Turkish Germans” or “Turkish originating Germans” living in Germany think would be “Turkish”, but also what the other German people instill as stereotypes.

The second source of identity is religion. Religion can become a very important identity *anchor*. Islam represents a basic unity of belief within a rich cultural diversity. While all Muslims share certain beliefs and practices, such as belief in God, the Qur’an, Muhammad, and the Five Pillars of Islam, discussions and divisions have arisen over questions of political and religious leadership, theology, interpretations of Islamic law, and responses to modernity and the West. Therefore, Islamic practice expresses itself in different ways within a vast array of cultures that extend from North Africa to Southeast Asia, as well as Europe and America; bringing these two sources of *culture and religion* together means that the homogenous idea of being “Muslim” is counteracted by the differences in religious and cultural practices.

Moreover, there is another point to add to this diversity. Muslims in Europe live in countries with different political systems and state principles, like *laïcité* or secularism. These conditions have a major influence on the practice of religious beliefs as well. To give an example: Whereas the headscarf/veil is not at all questioned and discussed as a religious norm in Muslim majority countries, there had been a lot of theological discussions among Muslims living in especially European countries like France and Germany about whether it is a religious norm or not. That also has an impact on the perspective of the status of a veil and literally on wearing a veil as a Muslim woman.

Another example of diverse understandings of religion would be shaking hands. Muslims became aware of one very important juristic legal reference of the Islamic Law, namely: *urf* (meaning “custom”). This refers to the “custom” of given society, and requires Islamic rulings to consider the local custom.¹ Therefore, some Muslims have been discussing that shaking hands to welcome each other is a very essential German greeting tradition, and thus it would cause more harm than peace to shake hands for greeting situations. Others keep the view that not shaking hands with the opposite gender should be followed because they believe that it is a religious norm not to do so. Dealing with different situations evokes the awareness of a dusty legal tradition that is actually very ambiguous.

Further, Muslim identities are particularly challenged by social changes. For instance, due to socioeconomic conditions, traditional gender roles have been questioned. A survey conducted in 2012 by the German Islam Conference demonstrated that Muslim families no longer prefer classical role distributions anymore: that is, the husband working outside and the wife being the homemaker who also takes care of the children. It is not a convincing model in view of the economic challenges. This reality has modified their religiously or culturally grounded interpretation of role distribution.

Additionally, Muslim identities and the public image of Muslims in Germany are strongly influenced by political and media discourses. That means that Muslims have to react to different kinds of foreign ascriptions of what Muslims might be. I would like to mention few cornerstones of these discourses:

¹ See Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 269.

1. The Islamization of debates and individuals (for example, that the causes of honor killings, domestic violence lies in Islam).

2. Maintaining the dichotomy of Islam and the West, or of Islam and the modern life style, as exemplified with the headscarf. (That is, the oppressed woman wears a headscarf and the emancipated one does not).

3. Entangled Islam and Integration Politics. The political discourses give the impression as if the German state had an idea of what type of Muslim they would like to have in Germany. The German Media and Politics avoids speaking about German Muslims which are considered as a natural part of German society. They only speak about their accepted, “favorite Muslims”, and the “un-wanted” kinds of Muslims. The favorite Muslim is highlighted as liberal or progressive. Some Muslims even try in response to determine various criteria as “liberal” through the help of associations called, for instance, *Union of Liberal Muslims*. This thereby marks the difference between “conservative” Muslims, or the “un-wanted” Muslim and “favorite” ones.

Who might be an “un-wanted” Muslim? Someone who is practicing Islam and prays five times per day, does not drink alcohol, does not shake hands, wears a hijab, fasts, ec.... In contrast to this the “wanted Muslim” is the one who is totally assimilated in that sense that you are not different in your public behavior and or outlook from other non-Muslim German.²

The political discourses about Islam and Muslims in Germany and the Muslim Community itself lays down a specific framework which shapes the thinking and influences the glasses through Muslims’ outlook of the Qur’an, the Sunna, and Islamic tradition. Unsurprisingly, it massively influences their interpretation of Islam and their attitudes to religious contents immensely.

Even though democratic countries promote a tolerant, integrative, and progressive mindset (especially after 9/11), ISIS, terroristic attacks, and bombings committed by Muslims in Germany and throughout Europe, the image of the Muslim has become an increasingly negative one. Nowadays, the media and right-wing parties in different European countries try to draw a picture that treats Muslims as terrorists altogether. They try to stoke anxiety and fear in society against Muslims by claiming that Muslims represent themselves in a nice way, but in truth have bad intentions. Like the bad wolf in the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, they sooner or later will bite. According to their logic, that means at some point Muslims will show their real faces; i.e. they will Islamize Western society, kill infidels, establish an Islamic state, and set the Sharia as a binding law for everybody.

These anxieties are then often reflected in social ideals. Current surveys in Germany have shown that many non-Muslim Germans would prefer not having a Muslim as a neighbor. In contrast (or however), if we ask Muslims in Germany, they appreciate German constitutional law very much since it gives them all the needed liberties for practicing their religion. Under this law, they establish mosques and they are allowed to set up their own religious communities, and so forth. Taking a closer look at mosques in Germany and the religiosity of the communities it is clear that Muslims take the Islamic tradition seriously, but try to find answers for today’s questions by the help of the Tradition.

² Assimilation does not require a formation of values and attitudes like empathy, tolerance and respect for the others. I remember Hannah Arendt and her writings, in which she speaks about that German Jews were very much liberal and assimilated totally, but that this fact was not enough to protect them from xenophobia and deportation.

In regard to institutional possibilities with an emphasis on Christian-Muslim dialogue it can be noted that many initiatives of this kind have been established and reinforce that interreligious dialogue is a very valuable, rooted, and important tradition in Germany. After 9/11 many Christian-Muslim dialogue “round tables” emerged in Germany. This development occurred through a grassroots movement of ordinary people in attempt of getting to know the other faith better. As a consequence, representatives of religious communities came together around these tables to talk about religious beliefs. These discussion groups between Christian and Muslims (sometimes also with Jews) were in time called *Kuscheldialog*, which means *cuddle-dialogue*. because it was not really about dialogue as a practice of (self-)critical encounter. What do I mean by that? The root of the Greek word *dialogue* is composed of “dia”, meaning “through”, and “logos”, meaning “word and speech.” Together they mean the *mind-change* of somebody who is engaged in dialogue. But, within historical examples of these discussion groups, it neither critically disputed vivid questions, nor did it really change something on a social level regarding the relationship between Christians and Muslims. It rather issued into a setting where people came together, explained something about their beliefs, ate and drank, and organized sometimes a multi-religious prayer together to show the peacefulness of Muslims and their positive attitude to their home city! Surely, the kind of interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims that took place at these roundtable discussions has diminished or been called into question after the increase of terroristic attacks. I should also say that the German state does not really make its political contribution through policies of promoting interfaith dialogue (whereas it does try to do it abroad).

In addition to that, it can be seen that the belief in the peace-making potential of religion is getting lost and society is becoming more and more secular. Also for Christians, it can be stated that the ability to recognize Christian thought patterns or a Christian worldview behind everyday language, is decreasing. Thus, nowadays the classical model of dialogue has been called into question. Against this background, new models of dialogue that cultivate attitudes essential for societal co-existence and that, at the same time, initiate more understanding and friendship among Christians and Muslims, or other religions are desperately needed. To the point that Muslims are a religious minority in the European countries, they are asked to find new ways of encountering the “other” and finding ways of living together. Therefore, the round tables were actually good starting points of contract, and became a natural part of their identity whereas compared with today’s Turkey (for example). Turks living in Turkey do not really have a sensitivity for religious dialogue. To put it differently, they do not see a necessity doing interfaith dialogue with the religious other.

(3) Refugees in Germany and Europe and their Impact on Muslim identities

Let’s look at some **2016** numbers of **people applying for Asylum in Germany**: 350,000 applied from Syria; 180,000 from Afghanistan; 120,000 from Iraq; and 80,000 from Albania. Germany admitted about 1 Million refugees until now. 73% of the Refugees were Muslims, 14% Christians. The Christians admitted belong to the different denominations like Syrian-

Orthodox, Armenian-Orthodox, Coptic, Catholic-Chaldeans, Catholic-Armenians, or Greek-Catholic.³

Regarding Muslim refugees, opportunities and challenges for German society and the Islamic communities should be addressed. For example:

- Some long-established Muslims in Germany consider Muslim refugees partly as a threat to their already achieved status. This perception is based in the feeling that those new Muslims and their potential “uncivilized” behavior will affect (and already affects) the overall understanding of foreigners, and creates hostility between Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Because the established Muslims are well integrated, they know the cultural codes and the etiquette. They are mostly well-educated, have achieved a certain socio-economic level, and therefore they do not want to be put under the same umbrella.

- More or less, the explicit claim of exclusive representation of the Turkish Islamic communities for all Muslims in Germany will be questioned. (I call this attitude “religious tribalism”). This will lead to the questioning of the stated Turkish Islamic community’s own understanding of Islam and opens a door for religious ambiguity.

- Turkish mosques are receiving and hosting refugees. These people stay at the mosque all day and the mosque management and the community-members don’t know what to do with them. They are overburdened and don’t have programs to offer them. This current situation: the cultural diversity and especially the language barriers might lead to good changes in Turkish-dominated mosques if they start coming up with new programs and approaches for these people (language school as well as social activities) and making them an active part of the whole community.

- Muslims from Syria or Lebanon (and to some extent also those from Albania) are partly more cosmopolitan (even the religious ones) than the longer-settled Muslims in Germany. They bring a high potential of co-existence because of their long tradition of *living dialogue*. Appreciation of the *religious* and *cultural other* is an attitude, for example, that especially Syrian refugees bring with them.

- There might be (positive or more open) changes in the mosque landscape, as well as an increase of Muslim-Christian dialogue, which is not a formal one, but rather a *living one*.

- Muslims who fled their country are grateful to Germany for their protection. This attitude favors the willingness to integrate faster.

- Muslims who fled their country are often traumatized. Here lies the danger of those who escape to simple religious truths and worldviews (that is fundamentalism/extremism). Therefore, it is very important how refugees are nursed pastorally (nursed in religious matters), how successful Islamic communities are in their religious outreaching, and how fast they get integrated into the labor market.

In this context, I also would like to mention Christian refugees and their impact by their presence in Europe. Christian refugees from the Orient will have and are already influencing the present Christian communities, especially the Syrian-Orthodox.

- The awareness of differentiation within Christianity could increase.

³ See http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Publikationen/Flyer/flyer-schluesselzahlen-asy1-2016.pdf?__blob=publicationFile; and http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Publikationen/Broschueren/bundesamt-in-zahlen-2016-asy1.pdf?__blob=publicationFile.

- Similar to what I have tried to sketch about the exchange between religious understanding and social-political influences, Oriental Christians bring their own religious cultures, which are different from Western ones, and appear to be very interested in secular references and the compatibility with central Europe's philosophical traditions. Thus, resident Christians and Oriental Christians learn new liturgical forms of Christianity from each other, which creates new impulses to answer the demands of justifying one's own beliefs.

- Catholic Christians may examine more intensively the question about the unity of the Church and with that, a serious historical review will be necessary.

- Oriental Christians might be connecting to Syrian-Orthodox Churches that have already been established in Germany and have been affected by their given environment, which will also have a "German color." But it could also be that the Oriental Christian refugees will also connect with Catholic communities. That might mean that general questions about matters of faith and life which have been answered in traditional/common ways will be answered differently. German communities will also prove how much they are open to including "others" into their communities and whether they are open enough to be "affected" by new people. Alternately, the opposite could happen. German communities impose their "own understanding and perspectives" on the Oriental Christians and close themselves up to other cultures and practices. Even that would have an impact on German societies. For example, Dr. Werner Kahl, who is a Professor at the University of Frankfurt and the Head of the Academy of Mission at the University of Hamburg, says that long-term changes in the German church landscape may occur when immigrants themselves study theology and take offices in the church.

- And of course, some refugees –Muslims and Christians – are glad to be no longer exposed to the "religious pressure" of their home countries and do what they want. For example, they may decide to not follow any church or religion, or instead establish their own "churches".

(4) Impacts on Christian-Muslim Dialogue

According to these brief analyses, I think that we need to promote a dialogue among Christians and Muslims anew. There is, on both sides, much more diversity related to religious and cultural dimensions. Even though we need a sufficient theoretical framework to address these issues with responsibility, I would in the same breath say, that we should eventually overcome those theoretical fortresses and start to act. We need a *living dialogue*, a dialogue of appreciation of the religious and cultural "other." In religiously and culturally pluralistic societies, nobody should be asked to sacrifice for its existence within a given society. In order to appreciate the enrichment and richness of a diverse society, we have to cultivate emotions, virtues, and behaviors connected to hospitality, empathy, and compassion. This approach demands a new understanding, a new design of dialogue.

I remember Turkish Christians, as well as Turkish Muslims in Turkey, who used to live in Mardin, a city of East-Anatolia. (I am sure the same could be said for many cities in Syria and Lebanon.) They would say that the mutual appreciation and coexistence of Christians and Muslims certainly did not take place due to the inter-faith or inter-theological

dialogue between local Assyrian monks and Islamic religious leaders, but through the enacted, practiced dialogue of the believers themselves. By living with each other, by reciprocal visits, sharing life, celebrations, and participating to liturgies of the other, they learned to understand each other by living together. Hence, Comparative Theology, a new style of doing theology, speaks about appreciating or establishing an improved comprehension of the other's theology or religion through those same reciprocal practices. This appreciative attitude incites lay people to listen to the priest when they were invited to mosques for preaching. Or, vice versa, when an Imam was invited to give a talk during a mess. Accordingly, entering dialogue means that beliefs will be questioned, reviewed, and newly understood (perhaps). Surely, there will be changes in the religious self-understanding of especially Turkish-origin Muslims in Germany now. There will be new ways of practicing religion. They might even be more interactive because of their experiences of living together. Also, European Christians may be more positively challenged by the presence of refugees. European Christians may open up more strongly to Muslims and to recognize them as fellow citizens on the one hand, by the presence of so many Muslims, and on the other hand by the presence of Oriental Christians.

For that, a theology and a new model, format, or style of dialogue has to be constructed in a way that can answer daily life questions of believers in the context of intercultural and interreligious living conditions. Surely, these anticipated changes might appear as challenges for our individual, religious, and social identities - but they also become chances to truly grasp what solidarity in a heterogeneous world can and could mean!

Thank you for your attention.