

Is Pluralism a Problem?

The Deutsche Islam Konferenz

as an Example for Integration Policy

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1. Introduction

Islam is as prominent on the political agenda in Germany as hardly ever before. This is due to the intensive integration efforts by important social actors as well as to the new position that relevant political actors advocate concerning Islam. The fact that part of the so-called immigrant workers living permanently in Germany are Muslims, too, has been neglected by politicians for a long time. This point of view has changed significantly in the past few years. The discussion whether Germany is an immigration country or not has led to the understanding that migrant workers will stay permanently in Germany. This understanding has also led to a change in the perception of the migrants. Whereas before, they were mainly categorized in terms of their national origin, the focus is now on their religious orientation. The decisive role of religion in connection with integration is evidenced by the numerous debates about Islamist terror, the building of mosques, Islamic religious education, the wearing of headscarves and burkas as well as other Islamic religious practices.

From a political point of view, these debates bring about an urgent call for action which has led to a recent *realignment* concerning Islam. The most visible effect of this realignment and the need for action as perceived by German politicians was the introduction of the German conference on Islam, the *Deutsche Islam Konferenz* (DIK), by the former German Minister of the Interior, Wolfgang Schäuble, in September 2006. The most important forum joining the German state with the Muslims living in Germany was continued in 2009 by the new Minister of the Interior, Dr. Thomas de Maizière, during the coalition between Christian Democrats and Liberals. Because of the Muslims' goal to be recognized as religious community German politicians repeatedly asked for one single point of contact. Searching for this one point of contact once more revealed the "problem of pluralism" inside Islam.

This paper concentrates on the aforementioned problem and poses the question what makes this a problem and whether the search for one single point of contact is useful. It is argued that the religious pluralism which has often been perceived as a problem can be viewed as a potential basis for a successful integration policy. The debate about the integration of Muslims and the *Deutsche Islam Konferenz* can be seen as a practical example for dealing with plurality in society.

Accordingly, this paper consists of three chapters. In chapter 2, the varieties of Islam are described because these varieties are neglected for the most part in the debates – to acknowledge these varieties, however, is an important prerequisite for solving the actual problems with integration. Chapter 3 is about the *Deutsche Islam Konferenz*. Subchapters deal with the first stage (chap. 3.1) and the second stage of the DIK (chap. 3.2) as well as the relevant debates and problems in regard to Islamic pluralism. In chapter 4, problems arising from the recent integration debate are discussed and the potential options of the varieties are outlined.

2. Plurality through and in Islam

At the moment, dealing with various religions and their relationship to politics is an integral part of social science studies. This can be proved clearly by the numerous publications on this subject. (Cf. a.o. Minkenberg/Willems 2002; Walther 2004; Schweitzer 2006; Gabriel/Höhn 2008; Pollack 2009) The relationship between politics and religion in Germany has been supplemented by another aspect in the last few years. The growing importance of issues concerning the connection between religion and politics can be traced back especially to the intensified preoccupation with Islam. Thus, the Muslims were “discovered” not only by the mainstream population in Germany. (Jonker 2005) Within the realm of social science as well, the preoccupation with Islam became more relevant. This is made obvious by the ever-growing number of publications on this subject. On the whole, there is apparently a kind of “goldrush mentality” concerning Islam studies (Tezcan 2003: 237; Schubert/Meyer 2010b). On the one hand, the debates about Islam clash more and more with debates about integration; on the other hand, integration issues are being discussed increasingly in the context of religious persuasions. (Halm 2008: 27) The purported Islamization of the integration debate does not mean that the problems with integration as perceived by politicians have to be traced back to religious reasons. The religious orientation, however, plays an important role in this context. In one of the first empirical studies on Islam in Germany at the beginning of the

eighties, it became obvious what the discussion basically is about until today: “Islam and integration”. (Thomä-Venske 1981) In the last few decades, the viewpoint of the debate has shifted significantly. While the book by Thomä-Venske was mainly influenced by the conflict between left and right, and religion played a minor role, from the nineties on, the debate steered away from the traditional left-right paradigm and concentrated increasingly on the role of religion.

The debate about the integration of Muslims is characterized by a fundamental contradiction. On the one hand, recent studies have shown that Muslim immigrants are clearly willing to be integrated (Haug 2009; cf. also Uslucan 2010) and that the majority of the Muslims has already taken a post-integrative stance (Foroutan 2009: 31). On the other hand, this is being challenged by public opinion: time and again, the reputedly irreconcilable difference between Islam and the “Western world” is brought forth. (Cf. a.o. Leggewie 2009: 605; Kastoryano 2002:184; Lerch 2006) Islam is considered as a symbol for the apparent difference between occident and orient. (Hejazi 2009: 306) Accordingly, Muslims are viewed as troublemakers, (Leggewie 2005: 6) that do not fit in the modern Western world. The sweeping antagonization of Islam and the Western world, however, is no more than an *allegation*, which needs to be analyzed in two ways. Any effort to define the Western world as homogeneous entity inevitably will fail as well as any effort to integrate Islam as a homogeneous entity.

Having a closer look at Germany reveals that there are numerous different and contradicting values and interests. The population is characterized by being affiliated with different economical classes and social strata. Moreover, there are various other aspects such as gender, education, marital status etc. that embody these differences. Apart from religious issues, it becomes obvious that there is no homogeneous “Western world”. Therefore, the seeming antagonism Islam against the Western world is clearly put into perspective.

Allowing for religion as another aspect, the picture becomes even more complex. The idea that a homogeneous religious community suddenly has to deal with a new, strange religion is an integral part of the antagonization between Islam and the Western world. Having a closer look at the map of the religious communities in Germany, however, clearly reveals that religious pluralism is a part of modern

society even with Islam out of the picture. Besides the Christian main churches, a vast number of religious beliefs exist. This includes several minor Christian churches, the Orthodox Church, Jewish communities and eastern beliefs, new religions and esoteric convictions. (Hero/Krech/Zander 2008: 31) In regard of this variety, the integration debate, which often tends to generalize (Jäger/Halm 2007), and the alleged homogeneity of the mainstream society have to be viewed from a different point of view. Modern society produces strangeness and cultural diversity. The pluralization of lifestyles has become an inherent aspect of modern society. This is also true for the Muslims living in Germany, who are not homogeneous in a cultural sense either. (Cf. also Gestring 2010)

Just as mainstream society is diverse, Islam does not emerge as a cohesive entity in its host country either. Religious affiliations aside, it can be established that Muslims come from different countries. Thus, they differ from each other in terms of national origin. Even considering that most first-generation Muslims were mainly immigrant workers from Turkey, this group can be split up into smaller subgroups rather than lumped together because of their shared religion. This is especially true for the second and third generation of the Muslims living in Germany. Similar to German mainstream society, this group consists of different classes and strata as well as different cultural and educational clusters. (Roald 2005: 181) Additionally, there are the German converts who come from German mainstream society and add another facet to the picture of Islam in Germany.

Looking at the only supposed correspondence, the Islamic denomination, an even more complex picture emerges. Not only can Muslims in Germany be divided into Sunnites and Shiites, these groups themselves can be further divided into traditional and liberal Muslims, strictly puritan and overtly open-minded Muslims, Muslims who live a spiritual way of life and those who are opposed to mysticism. Some Muslims feel that politics are an important part of their religion, whereas others firmly reject politics in the name of Islam. The different ways of understanding Islam and practicing it as a religion have a long history. Nowadays, these ways offer their own, individually modern peculiarities. (Krämer 2007: 172; on the variety of Islam cf. also Haug et al. 2009; Hejazi 2009; Bertelsmann-Stiftung 2008; Brettfeld/Wetzel 2006; Hartmann 2006; Meier 1995) Given these different expressions and approaches, Islamism, on which debates about Islam often focus, is only one way of

applying various Islamic teachings to individual lifestyles and social systems. (Krämer 2007: 172) “While the terrorists look for reasons to justify violence [in the Koran] and find them, liberal Muslims look for peaceful passages that advertise cohabitation.” (Abdel-Samad 2009) The relationship between Islam and terrorism, which is still determined by public opinion, has to be put into perspective time and again. According to the German federal agency for internal security, the *Verfassungsschutz*, about one percent of the Muslim population in Germany is involved in organizations with an Islamist background. Islamic extremism is no homogeneous movement either, but offers various facets: “One could get the impression that all Islamists, even Muslims in general, were potential assassins. It is one of the tasks of the *Verfassungsschutz* to correct this impression and give a more realistic assessment of the threat.” (Innenministerium des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 2008: 20) Basically, it has to be stated that Islam in regard to plurality is no different from Christianity (Roy 2006: 8) or other religions and is therefore no homogeneous entity. (Krech 2008: 25) Fundamentalism is not indigenous to Islam, but can be attributed to other religions as well.

The aforementioned Islamic variety in Germany can also be deduced from the various Islamic organizations. The sheer existence of the numerous Islamic organizations and parent organizations has to be interpreted as proof of the inherent plurality of Islam. On the hand, the Islamic organizations cater to the expectations of individual Muslims in regard of representing and implementing their interests. On the other hand, they form a reaction to the expectations of the German politicians who are responsible for legitimizing their acknowledgement. (Kastoryono 2002: 185) The problem with representing one Islamic goal can be illustrated best by having a closer look at the DIK.

3. The realignment of Islam policy in Germany

3.1 The first stage of the Deutsche Islam Konferenz

The introduction of the *Deutsche Islam Konferenz* (DIK) in 2006 showed that German politicians had realized the need to act in regard to integration policy. The first institutionalized dialogue between politicians and representatives of Islam was planned as a long-term process of negotiations and communication. At first, Islam received little to no attention, then it was perceived and described as a religious faith that posed a threat to the Western world, but now, with the help of several action groups, it is supposed to become an integral part of German society. There are two political goals behind the integration efforts. First, Islam shall no longer be perceived as dangerous and threatening, but as a functional religion that is a natural part of society. Second, Muslims are encouraged to reevaluate their position on Germany. According to the former German Minister of the Interior, Wolfgang Schäuble, Muslims “shall view this country and its secular nature no longer as something strange, which is contrary to their beliefs, but as a chance for freedom, and they are responsible for its preservation and realization. This sentence is valid for Muslims in Germany as well. If they take it serious, they will be German Muslims.” (FAZ, 27.10.2006) At the moment, this is an important objective of integration that is undisputed in political and private circles. (Halm/Meyer 2010)

The concrete goals of the DIK in its first stage were to improve the dialogue between the state and Muslims, through this, contribute to the integration of Muslims into society and the religious framework, to consolidate social solidarity and combat segregation. The *Deutsche Islam Konferenz* never did and still does not represent Muslims the way a religious community does. The German ministry of the interior is in charge because the ministry is traditionally responsible for the relationship with the religious communities in Germany on a federal level. (Deutsche Islam Konferenz)

In regard to the DIK, time and again there were questions about the representation of the German Muslims through the organizations. Apparently, the fragmentary nature of Islam had a paralyzing effect on Islam policy for a long time. (Chbib 2010; cf.

also Tezcan 2010) Therefore, the former German Minister of the Interior, Wolfgang Schäuble, expressed at the beginning of the first stage of the DIK the political objective as follows: “Perhaps we can give impetus so that Muslims organize themselves in a way that there are representatives we can talk to. Muslims want to be treated equally by the state, just like the Christian churches. In order for this to happen they have to create the organizational conditions required.” (SZ, 26.09.2006) The request for a *single point of contact* that sets Islamic positions and representatives revealed what politicians expected from the Islamic organizations. Thus, similar to the two big churches in Germany, negotiation procedures between the German state and Islam should be simplified or made possible, respectively. Government and legal structures force the Muslim organizations in Germany to strive for being acknowledged as a religious community.

As a result, in 2007 the four main Muslim parent organizations, the *Islamrat für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (IRD), the *Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland* (ZMD), the *Türkisch-islamische Anstalt für Religion* (DITIB) and the *Verband islamischer Kulturzentren* (VIKZ), merged to form the *Koordinationsrat der Muslime in Deutschland* (KRM). The KRM has the function of being the institutionalized, legitimate and authorized point of contact for the German state in important matters related to Islam and “promoting a cohesive representational structure for Muslims in Germany [...] in the long term”. (KRM 2007) it became obvious pretty soon that the objective of establishing a cohesive representational structure will not be easily achieved. There are several reasons for this. The main question is whether the KRM has indeed a representative character: for how many Muslims does the KRM speak? In spite of some academic efforts to find out which organizations represent how many Muslims in Germany, there is still considerable uncertainty concerning this question. This can be attributed to the difficulty with agreeing on widely accepted survey instruments because a “formal” membership in an Islamic organization is rather uncommon. Depending on aspects such as commitment to an organization, membership, utilization of offered services or polls, there are different numbers of persons who are organized in Muslim communities. (Halm 2010) The method being used always has a certain political dimension because the representation ratio, which is determined on this basis, decides whether the organizations are legitimate representing bodies in German society or not and is

highly relevant for the power structure of the organizations. A survey of the federal office for migration and refugees, the *Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge*, from 2008 revealed (Haug/Müssig/Stichs 2009) that only 25% of the Muslims felt that they were being represented by the organizations *Islamrat*, DITIB, ZMD and VIKZ, which form the *Koordinationsrat der Muslime*. While Schäuble argued that only 10-15 percent of the Muslims in Germany were represented by the KRM, the former KRM spokesman, Axel Ayyub Köhler, accused Schäuble of playing down the KRM. According to him, the KRM was the legitimate representative of 85 percent of the Muslim communities in Germany. Lale Akgün, migration expert of the SPD, however, cautioned against recognizing the KRM as a representative: “I foresee great difficulties for us if such conservative organizations speak for all Muslims in Germany.” (Quot. acc. to Focus, 05-02-2007) In addition to the problem of representativeness, there is also the *problem of the inherent Islamic plurality*, which became visible especially during the second stage of the DIK.

3.2 The second stage of the Deutsche Islam Konferenz

The second stage of the DIK, which was started in May 2010 by the new Minister of the Interior, Thomas de Maizière, during the coalition between Christian Democrats and Liberals, apparently does not fare better in achieving equal rights for Islam and establishing one single point of contact. Continuing this kind of *symbolic policies* is an important incentive for solving actual problems regarding the relationship between the state and Islam. At the same time, the second stage of the DIK reveals a vast potential for conflict between the Islamic organizations and the politicians and inside the KRM as well. This also illustrates the heterogeneity of Islam in terms of religion and politics in Germany. (Schubert/Meyer 2010a: 3)

At the moment, only the DITIB and the VIKZ are represented in the DIK. The IRD was more or less barred from participating by de Maizière because of several preliminary proceedings against leading members; the ZMD refused to attend because of the conceptual direction of the DIK. Moreover, the argument about who

may legitimately represent all Muslims in the DIK escalated. Critics focused on certain individual Muslims who – in the eyes of the KRM organizations – were not properly legitimized. The argument about the structure of the DIK and the legitimation of organized and unorganized Muslims aside, the homogeneity of Muslim objectives is short-lived if it is – as in the case of the KRM – not an explicit objective. This means virtually the breaking-up of the KRM. In this light, the KRM is nothing more than a mere platform for the four parent organizations which is not supposed to call into question their independence. (Rosenow/Kortmann 2010) Therefore, it is difficult to identify common Muslim objectives apart from the call for equal rights and equal treatment similar to the established religious communities – notwithstanding the fact that the parent organizations represented by the KRM are considered to be conservative. (Cf. Leggewie 2009: 604)

The establishment of the Liberal-Islamischer Bund (LIB) is another noteworthy detail because it serves as an alternative to the existing parent organizations. The LIB claims that it unites and represents those Muslims who do not feel that their liberal views of Islam are being adequately represented so far in the debates and political processes in Germany and Europe: “Many Muslims who live here in Germany and in Europe no longer have the same understanding of Islam that is typical of the countries their parents came from. They are rooted firmly in Germany or Europe. In the European pluralist society, they form a group of considerable size and they want to assert their right to be heard and the responsibility that comes with it.” (Liberal-Islamischer Bund) This shows that there are conflicting interests inside the KRM as well as conflicts between the conservative and liberal organizations. This political conflict between conservatives and liberals deserves more attention in the future. The idea of German politicians to establish one single point of contact for all issues concerning Islam in order to promote neo-corporate forms of organization (*Konzertierte Aktion, Bündnis für Arbeit*) apparently is doomed to failure – especially in view of the circumstances of further pluralization.

4. Conclusion: Is pluralism a problem or a chance?

The “*forced homogenization*” to form a common body representing Muslim interests induced by politicians reduces the real pluralism of the Muslim community and limits the options for openly supporting this pluralism. At the same time, the call for a single point of contact and the idea to represent Muslim ideas by a single body neglects the varieties of people with a Muslim background. (Spielhaus 2006: 32-33) Acknowledging these varieties can be a chance to promote the integration of Muslims. Upon examination, the collective “us” used in the relevant (integration) debates often proves untenable and not really helpful as argumentative pattern. This is also quite true in dealing with Islam. Antagonist categories such as “us” and “them” imply that there are similarities on both sides that do not exist as absolutes. In doing so, not only the aforementioned varieties are neglected. When creating these categories one tries to establish a discrepancy (in this case: Islam vs. the “Western world”) in order to dismiss people who do not fit into this artificial cliché as an exception to the rule. At the same time, Islamist points of view which are only held by a minority are declared as typical traits of the Islamic way of life. (Cf. also Spielhaus 2006: 34)

In this context, the pluralist approach may be labeled as an alternative because it acknowledges varieties even in apparently homogeneous groups and refuses to generalize. From a pluralist perspective, the world consists “of a vast variety of things, features and experiences that exist on their own and are independent from each other and cannot be traced back to one eternal, universal or singular basic principle.” (Schubert 2008: 44) Therefore, it has to be concluded that the characteristics attributed to Islam are not eternal or set in stone either. Whereas the general antagonization in “us” and “them” is based on the assumption “that the religious and cultural concepts of these groups cannot be changed”, (Spielhaus 2006: 35) the culture of the Muslim migrants in Germany “is not static, it changes and becomes more pluralist (Oberndörfer 2001: 13; cf. also Roald 2005: 188) Assuming that religious varieties which are open to criticism are not static, means that they are basically capable of improvement.

In spite of the changeability and the capacity to change of politics and Islam it has to be confirmed that religious pluralism in Germany is a fact. The permanent presence of Islam cannot be denied or overcome. It is an obvious and irreversible fact that has to be taken into account in any integration policy. (Leggewie 2009: 593; Kastoryono 2002: 184) There are, however, options to mitigate the explosive consequences caused by these varieties, but politicians have – especially in the framework of the DIK – to prepare themselves for dealing with many different Muslim officials representing different interests in the long term. Thus, it will hardly be necessary to look for one single point of contact, the conception of being able to direct the “integration of these varieties” top-down will become obsolete. To acknowledge these varieties will be a prerequisite for an integration which is pragmatic and not assimilative. The potential of these varieties is as extensive as the varieties themselves: Integration and equal rights for Islam have to take place on a broad and pluralistic basis. The more voices Islam uses to make itself heard, the better, and the European countries have to get used to the fact that Muslims will make themselves heard in a loud and visible manner and in a political sense (Leggewie 2009: 606) To this effect, however, the low acceptance of social pluralism has to be (Oberndörfer 2001: 13) amended. There is more at stake than just accepting the existing varieties. It is of utmost importance to view the existing differences in a positive light. Under these circumstances, the varieties have the potential to make cultural and religious characteristics appear as a mutual gain. The coexistence of different religions can be a means to put the claims to sole representation made by the different religions into perspective through exchange and dialogue. Religious pluralism in West European societies is described as a challenge to the Christian churches. (Gabriel 2009) For Germany, however, this means that the churches accept the religious pluralism and have to relinquish their monopoly of religion. (Steinacker 2006: 688) This loss does not have to lead to new problems. Religious pluralism does not inevitably cause conflicts, it can also constitute a constructive competition or, at least, peaceful coexistence (Hero/Krech/Zander 2008: 22) In this context, Islam in Germany is not a threat, but a useful enrichment. In order to use these varieties as a potential basis for integration into society as a whole some necessary conditions have to be met. Main prerequisites are knowledge about each other and factual education based on empirical data. In this regard, political science has a certain responsibility, too.

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