

## **Reflections on neighbourhood of Christians and Muslims in Germany and in plural societies in general**

Dr. Christian W. Troll, prof. ved Den Filosofiske-Teologiske Højskole, St. Georgen, Frankfurt

The main aim of this article is to address some of the outstanding problems, which result from the new “being placed in neighbourhood” of Christians and Muslims in Germany and Europe at large, together with people of other religious or ideological moorings - within the setting of plural democracy. Which statements of the German Basic Law and which legal structures, which attitudes, convictions and possible fears on the part of the (largely) new as well as on the part of the old co-citizens should be named and reflected upon, on the way to a reconciled society? What does the task of intercultural learning mean and how can we develop strategies of reconciliation? And what about the duty – in this context – to which Christians (not unlike the Muslims) know themselves called: to witness individually and corporately to the truth and the values which they know entrusted to them by God to be shared with all?

### **Statistical Information**

In Germany today live up to three million and a half Muslims. Included in this number are roughly 600 000 Alevites. This fact is not the result of planned religious expansion of Islam but rather the consequence of economically and politically conditioned movements of migration. Only the development of the industrial macrospace that is European Union and the massive enlistment of labour from the Mediterranean [and South Asia and other parts of the Commonwealth, as far as Great Britain is concerned] has led to the formation of substantial Muslim populations in Western Europe, including Germany. The majority of the Muslim population of the first generation in the Federal Republic was composed of working families which hailed from the rural areas of Anatolian Turkey. Besides, there were smaller groups of Turks from urban areas. Then there is the substantial number of asylum seekers, which for many years now have been coming from various countries and crisis regions in the Balkans, the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

Roughly four fifth of all adherents of Islam in Germany are Muslims of Turkish origin. This Turkish preponderance leads to the fact that Islam in Germany bears a Turkish-Ottoman face rather than an Arab one. Besides the Sunnites we have the Alevites, who constitute up to 30% of the ethnically Turkish Muslims – with their tradition shaped by Shiite as well as shamanist and pre-Anatolian Christian elements. Until recently the “Office for Religious Affairs” in Ankara (Diyanet Ishleri Bakanligi) had simply ignored them and treated their tradition as just a form of Anatolian folklore. But in Germany they have become fully aware of their distinct identity. Also, other ethnic groups of Turkey have constituted themselves a distinct groups in Germany, especially the Kurds, whose number in Germany exceeds by far half a million.

Not a few Turks in Germany continue to feel themselves indebted to the ideals of the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, especially with regard to the separation, in principle, of the religious and the political, or, more precisely speaking: the subordination of the religious under the Turkish national idea; as also with regard to the openness for the positive achievements of modernity (not least in the field of the human sciences) and a considerable pride in the Turkish nation and history.

From the former Yugoslavia hails the second-largest group of Muslims in Germany, among them many refugees from Bosnia. The historical and political orientation to Central Europe had liberalised Yugoslavian Islam, in part even secularised it. All in all there live in Germany between 150 000 to 200 000 Muslims from the Arab world, and Twelver-Shiite Islam is represented above all by Iranian Muslims: business people, students, academics and academically trained professions, asylum seekers.

The number of the German Muslims is rising rapidly and some time ago has crossed the half million mark. In their number are included ethnically German converts to Islam, among them the greatest number being German spouses of Muslim who have chosen Islam as adults, children from Christian-Muslim marriages and a rising number of naturalized citizens. From the time of the introduction of the new citizenship law, naturalizations have increased substantially, especially among Muslims of the second and third generation. Some of the converts make it a point to define themselves and their lifestyle in conscious contrast to that of the majority society and culture and stand often, in a kind of missionary attitude, for a conservative Islamic alternative to European society and life world. At the same time, there exists a more liberal group of converts which consciously remains in the cultural tradition of Europe and asks the Muslims in Europe to practise and think Islamic faith consciously in a contextualised European manner.

### **The development of a distinct milieu**

From the middle of the 1970's onwards the policy in Germany of favouring the establishment and developing of Muslim families (*Familiennachzug*) and a certain material consolidation of the Muslim immigrants and their families have led to a situation, where in areas of concentration of Muslim settlement a Turkish residential population has developed, with Turkish shops and coffeehouses, clubs and associations, prayer halls and mosques. Muslim groups of other nationalities also have built their centres. In this way a network of Turkish and Islamic-Mediterranean life style, culture and religions has come about, especially in the large conurbations as e.g. Hamburg, Ruhr-district, Rhine-Main region, the South-west around Mannheim, Ludwigshafen and Stuttgart, Munich and Nürnberg-Erlangen and so forth.

This development has improved the life situation of the Islamic families. But it does not alter the fact that the Muslim minority finds itself living in a context, which is indifferent and at times even hostile vis-à-vis a life according to Muslim parameters and customs. The times for ritual prayer in family and public, the construction of mosques with or without minaret – all this is, here in Europe, no longer a matter of course as it was back home, but rather it has to be adhered to, at times against odds, to be practised consciously and possibly even to be battled for in long drawn-out legal proceedings. The industrial world of labour with its strictly regulated processes of work and production and secularized society with its rich offer of consumer goods and leisure are both, simultaneously: enticement and menace.

Many react to this in stressing their belonging to Islam and in keeping strictly or perhaps over-strictly, to the traditional rules of Muslim life that one had been accustomed to in one's country of origin. To the German population Muslim families that are shaped by such an attitude and outlook and that therefore consciously put space between themselves and their non-Muslim environment, appear strange. They are easily judged as deliberately resisting "integration". These families themselves, however, consider their falling back on traditional ways of behaviour as protection against cultural erosion and as a kind of confessional statement.

## **Islamic Centres and Organisations**

This rejection of the surrounding society and its way of life out of fear to lose one's identity, in other words out of a state of feeling endangered, increasingly is being viewed by Muslims themselves with critical eyes and is rejected by many of them, especially younger ones, as a cliché. Young second and third-generation male and female Muslims participate actively in social and political life, without giving up their Islamic moorings. At the same time they are met ever more frequently in the committees of Muslim organisations. Hence, for Islam in Germany the ascription "foreign" turns out to be ever less correct; Islam in Germany is rapidly becoming "heimisch", indigenous feeling at home in Germany and being viewed as part of the Germany).

The Islamic centres fulfil an important function in fostering among Muslims in Germany community cohesion and the maintaining of identity. According to Muslim sources of information there exist far more than 2000 prayer halls (normally as part of Muslim centres with prayer halls and other related facilities), frequently modified factory halls, storeys of large establishments and shops, sometimes new constructions. In the meantime in many places purpose-built mosques have been constructed, by now up to far more than 50. Normally these places of worship are linked with, or part of one of, the bigger Muslim organisations. Thus their religious and political position is determined. Ritual prayer, especially on Friday, and Koran teaching are the first tasks of the mosque. Furthermore, it constitutes especially in the German situation of being minority, a point of contact for human and cultural communication, yet possibly also for ideological and political formation. In most places of prayer, Christians and Muslims are welcome as visitors. For many Turks, Kurds, Bosnians and Arabs Islam as a practised religion plays no more than a minor role or even none at all. They may be regarded as Muslims in the cultural sense only. It is estimated that roughly 80% of the Muslims in Germany do not live any more in mosque-related ways.

## **Youth and religious education**

The children that grow up in the Federal Republic are exposed to totally new influences. The school with its open education and the far-advanced moral indifference of society worry many Muslims parents. They are not opposed to good and solid formation, but at the same time they also want to transmit to their children convictions and practices that go with the Islamic faith.

Hence, many send their children to Koran courses where they learn to pronounce and understand at least a certain small number of chapters of the Koran (not least for use in prayer) by heart and are made familiar with the basic rules of Islamic life. In addition to the extra burden on their time table the children often get into conflict situations, since in many mosques there reign a certain rigour and strictness that contrast markedly with, and places a distance between, their social environment. All the more important it would seem that renewed efforts be made, to institute in state schools Islamic religious teaching as ordinary subject, according to the criteria of the German school system.

Among the Muslim youth the number of those increases, which have adapted to the thinking and the attitudes of their German peers. This leads to severe conflicts with their parents and other older relatives, especially among the girls. From among the federations and associations of the Muslims in the Federal Republic within the past years two important umbrella organisations have formed: The "Islamrat für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland" as well as the "Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland e.V." (ZMD). The „Türkisch-Islamische Union der Anstalt für Religion e.“ (DITIB) is the only one of the big organisations that have not joined any of these two umbrella organisations

and one big grouping, the “Verband der Islamischen Kulturzentren” (VIKZ) with its more than 750 mosque centres in autumn 2000 has separated from the Zentralrat. It thus constitutes a further strong Germany- and Europe-wide group.

### **The juridical framework for “living together”**

Aim of any strategy for the peaceful living together of Christians and Muslims is the integration of the Muslims into the relevant European society. Integration, however, by no means is identical in meaning with “assimilation”, i.e. total adaptation or becoming similar of the Muslims to the social relations in the Federal Republic of Germany. By proper integration we mean a gradual developing of peaceful *convivenza* of people of different origin, in mutual respect for the national, cultural and religious self-understanding of the “Other”. This presupposes a high measure of tolerance, even more: respect of the other and a continuous effort to understand, encounter and approach of one another.

It goes without saying that all this presupposes the genuine acceptance of the shared legal binding upon all. In other words: the bases for a peaceful coexistence of all human beings in the Federal Republic are the human rights and the basic law (*Grundgesetz*). Consequently the *Miteinander* of all citizens, new and old, Muslims, Christians, and all the others has to be based on these foundations. In this, religious freedom and the ensuring of equality of chances would seem to constitute key issues. For (Catholic) Christians here the unambiguous statements of the “Declaration on Religious Freedom” (*Dignitatis Humanae*) of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) are binding and remain a strong source of inspiration:

“The liberty or freedom from coercion in religion, which is proper to all as persons must also be allowed them when they act together. For religious community is required by the social nature both of human beings and of religion itself.

Hence such communities, as long as they do not disturb the proper requirements of public order, are entitled to due freedom in conducting their affairs in their own way, in honouring the Deity in public worship, in assisting their members to practise their religion, in nourishing them with instruction and in developing institutions in which their members can cooperate in ordering their lives according to their own religious tenets.” (*DH 4*)

One of the fundamental human rights which was formulated in the “Common Declaration of Human Rights” of Dec. 10, 1948, is the right to religious freedom. The principle of equality of opportunity results from the principle of equality (cf. art. 1; 7; 18). The Basic Law of the Federal Republic subscribes in its constitution explicitly to the human rights. Accordingly it guarantees religious freedom and equality of chances (art. 1; 3; 4). If the “living together” (*Konvivenz*) of Christians and Muslims and of all other citizens of our countries is to succeed, the human rights have to be taken as undisputed, absolute measuring stick. Freedom of religions and equality of chances have to be put into practice integrally.

In many cases however the juridical provisions and the reality on the ground are poles apart. Thus, large sections of the population are still lacking the felt conviction that a ‘yes’ to religious freedom implies of necessity a ‘yes’ to the free and dynamic development in our society of all the religions, including Islam.

Accordingly, the reflections that follow are concerned above all with the question, how this 'yes' to the presence of Muslims and of Islam in our society can be brought about in the majority society, a 'yes' of head and heart that would enable the country to solve the inevitably and ever anew arising tensions and conflicts with confidence.

Since religious freedom and equality of chances are clearly laid down in the Basic Law of Germany, there is no need for any modification of the Law. This holds true also with regard to the question of the recognition of Islamic communities as "*Körperschaften des öffentlichen Rechts*" (public bodies or corporations). Only in a few cases clarifications need to be discussed, for instance in the matter of the teaching of Islam in public schools as normal part of the curriculum for Muslim children whose parents opt for it, and also, for instance, the question of double citizenship.

As to religious freedom it is worth pointing out that this right cannot be attributed to Islam as such; it is rather an individual right, linked to the person which lives in the confines of the Federal Republic.

Hence this right is not tied to citizenship. It can therefore be claimed by any Muslim living in Germany. She or he has the right, to belong to her/his faith, and to educate her/his children in it. She/he has the right, to promote his/her religious faith. At the same time, religious freedom, as taught by Vatican Council and by the German Basic Law has its limits. Speaking in a most general way, one can say: the freedom rights have their limits, where other persons are entitled to the same rights. The different faith communities have to practise tolerance among them, a tolerance based on mutual respect. Because, religious freedom and equality of chances must not only be claimed they must also be granted.

The task of peaceful "living together in difference", based on justice and mutual respect, demands not least of the Christians in Germany that they support the Muslims in their effort to obtain full and real equality in all religious matters and with regard to equality of chances. This touches upon a number of points, the most important of which we should like to mention here: i.e. the building of mosques, Islamic burial grounds, slaughter according to Muslim rites, religious instruction for Muslims in state schools, Islam as public corporation (*Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*).

In principle it has to be emphasised that public decision makers (those belonging to the state) must not make themselves the champions of specific groups. This would undermine the principle of a religiously neutral state – which is not to be equated with a value-neutral state as Germany understands itself to be. That means: decisions have to be made impartially and in favour of peace and justice. This requires familiarity with the needs of the Muslims who are deeply affected by the decisions in question.

### **Concrete Problems of living together**

As mentioned already there exist far more than 2000 prayer halls/Muslim centres in Germany. Their function normally is barely recognizable from outside. A good number of years have passed since in the 1960's Muslim came to Germany as guest workers.

Whole new generations have grown up. Thus the desire on the part of the Muslims is only natural to pray and meet in purpose-built mosques (with dome and minaret). Many of these have already been constructed. However, the plans for such mosques again and again meet with resistance on the part

of the majority population, especially in smaller towns and villages and in regions strongly shaped by a compact traditional Christian culture and architecture. New purpose-built mosques substantially alter this traditional landscape palpably. Points of conflicts often are the height of the minaret and the loudspeaker- reinforced call to prayer. These are rejected by many non-Muslim inhabitants.

By way of principle there do hardly exist any questions about whether or not mosques may be built in Germany.

Mosques are buildings designated for religious cult – and of course they are also centres for the community with possibly extended commercial, educative purposes. Muslim associations and organisations here have to be treated in the same way as other religious groups planning to build places of worship and community centres. The height of the minaret must not be made dependent on the height of the highest spire in a given town or village but rather has to be decided upon by the local political authorities in an objective and fair way, without respect of person. With regard to the choice site for a new mosque (centre) varying interests may come into play, and they may contradict one another. For reasons of closeness to the population attending the mosque in question it would appear reasonable to place the mosque where most of these Muslims live. Possibly there may exist a tension with the principle mentioned in so far Muslims of a given place may have the desire to build a representative mosque, in other words, a mosque in agreeable surroundings, big enough to accommodate all participants of a given town in Friday prayers In possible tension with this principle there is.

In any case, it is essential to speak with one another about these matters and also about possible related open or hidden fears on one or even on both sides. The local pastors can be invited together with the Imam of the mosque to a meeting of the Muslims and the local non-Muslim population at a round table as it were. This also offers the opportunity, to address the fears of some as to the mosque being “a breeding ground of fundamentalism” as some term it.

It would seem to be advisable to establish on regional levels permanent Christian-Muslim societies or similar bodies, where Muslims and non-Muslim meet. It cannot only help to defuse a tense situation and to neutralize one-sided arguments. Being a permanent institution it can contribute information as to possible future areas of tension and thus contribute to de-escalation.

A central problem in the life of Islamic communities in Germany constitutes the question of the burial of deceased persons. True, even in these days most Muslims – especially ethnically Turkish Muslims – wish to be buried in their country of origin. But with the rise of the second and third generation the situation is changing palpably. On the one hand the transport back to Turkey of deceased persons is very expensive, and more and more Muslims wish to bury their relatives near to the place where they and their families have settled for good, in other words in Germany. Thus the question arises as to facilities for burying deceased Muslims in accordance with the established rites of burial. The Christian burial grounds do not correspond automatically to the Islamic requirements.

Also, important differences do exist between Muslim and Christian “cemetery/graveyard culture”.

If possible, the Islamic burial ground should lie outside towns and villages. It must not contain ornaments of statues made from iron or stone. The graves are dug in such a way that they point towards Mecca. The head of the deceased person points to the South West, the feet North East.

From this follows that Muslims should either have their own burial grounds or a distinct part of the common burial ground should be reserved for Muslim graves.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have deliberately concentrated on the corporative and thus predominantly political-juridical dimension of Christian-Muslim relations – and this always in the concrete context of Germany and Europe. The neutral framework that provides equal human rights to all citizens is of fundamental import. If and in so far we as citizens and as Christians and Muslim believers act honestly and consistently, we shall convince. We thus create the framework in which we as Muslim and Christian individuals, families, groups and communities, in the power that God's spirit confers, we can witness to the values that we as Muslims or as Christians would like to stand for effectively.

The credible effort to make the best of *convivenza* within the common framework of plural democracy will render meaningful the dialogue of values, whereby we vie with one another in the greater realisation of what is good.

We may even be granted the gift of growing deeper in our perception of the truth, which Muslims find enshrined in the Koran and we Christians in the person of Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah whose realm, I as a Christian believe, consists of all who honestly strive to respect and serve one another and thus live in the truth.

\* nærværende artikel er en forkortet udgave af originalen, *red.*