

The debate over Muslim “parallel societies” in Germany

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Within the space of a few days, the campaign of hysteria over actual and alleged Islamist militants has swept from Holland into Germany.

Liberal as well as conservative media outlets, politicians and feminists have proclaimed the “failure of multi-cultural society” and warned of the danger of “Muslim parallel societies”. It has suddenly been uncovered that within the population of Turkish origin in Germany, the suppression of rights of thousands of women and girls is taking place.

Reality is turned upside down here. There is no mention made of how poverty and discrimination lead to social exclusion and drive sections of the population into backwardness. Quite the opposite: the conclusion drawn is that the German state has been much too tolerant of foreigners, and this must come to an end.

It was not surprising that the right-wing Bavarian minister of the interior, Günter Beckstein, demanded that “foreigners living in Germany” recognize “our leading culture.” But the speaker on domestic affairs for the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) Bundestag faction, Dieter Wiefelspütz, also joined in. Wiefelspütz, in effect, called on Muslims to prove their peaceful convictions, and requested that Islamic communities dissociate themselves “clearly from those responsible for violence and religious mania”.

The deputy Christian Democratic Union (CDU) chairman, minister of culture for Baden-Württemberg and vice president of the central committee of German Catholics, Annette Schavan, demanded that Islamic clerics agree to preach in mosques in the German language. “We can no longer permit a situation where in mosques people preach in languages that are not understood outside of the Islamic community”, Schavan said to the German press agency. “Whoever is not understood”, warned Schavan, “runs the risk of inviting suspicion”.

Whether those attending religious services understand a sermon is evidently unimportant. It is crucial, however, that the intelligence services and police understand it.

Against the background of such comments, it is significant that an arson attack occurred against a Turkish mosque in

Sinsheim, near Heidelberg, Baden-Württemberg.

The secretary-general of the Christian Social Union (CSU), Markus Söder, argued that pupils in Bavaria should participate in daily morning devotions before school instruction. That would provide “security and orientation”. Germany needs a “model of Christian western culture”, he explained. This means, in his opinion, the reintroduction of school prayer. One needed to adopt a “clear course against Islam”.

In a motion to be presented to the German parliament, the conservative CDU-CSU faction demands that alleged Islamists be refused visas. In addition, “preachers of hate” already living in the country should be expelled. Harsher methods should be adopted against “anti-Semitic” and “anti-Western propaganda” in Islamic newspapers, books and web sites. The faction even demands the withdrawal of citizenship from those suspected of being “leading threats”.

“German nationality must not become a cover for terrorists”, the speaker on domestic affairs for the parliamentary group, Hartmut Koschyk (CSU), told the news magazine *Focus*.

As usual, the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* provides the “liberal” accompaniment to this right-wing witch-hunt. It refers to the terrible situation facing some Muslim families in Germany—and makes this the basis of an argument for stronger measures by the state.

The main headline of the news magazine reads: “Allah’s Daughters Deprived of Rights”. Nearly thirty pages of the magazine, written by a total of nine authors, details the fates of Turkish women and girls who are victims of arranged marriages, violence and repression. Visually prominent in the article are quotes from the Koran that emphasize the subordination of women. (The article does not note the existence of similar passages in the Bible). Equality between the sexes is thus presented as an invention of the Christian West.

In addition, the editors deplore the phenomenon of “young Turkish machos” in Germany, living amongst the third generation of immigrant workers. According to *Der Spiegel*,

these layers only rarely endeavoured to obtain good grades or training, and would rather spend their time suppressing their sisters, with the encouragement of their fathers.

Der Spiegel goes so far as to repeat arguments commonly made by overt racists, writing, for example: “[F]or many German women, Turkish neighbourhoods have long been No-Go areas. They avoid the streets where they are constantly approached, touched, and sexually harassed.” The magazine concludes: “[T]he only way to prevent the retreat of the Muslims into their own world” is to “integrate them and make certain they respect Western values and laws.”

Not a word is written on the social situation. Nothing on the fact that the unemployment ratio among Turks is twice as high as the national average; that the ratio of Turks dependent on social security is up to three times higher than for ethnic Germans. Not a word on the fact that “guest workers” receive only the dirtiest and most onerous jobs, which means their rates of illness and early retirement are also above average. Nothing is said about the massive destruction of jobs in the 1980s and 1990s in those sectors where “guest workers” were heavily employed. They were the first to lose their jobs, and amongst the last to be offered new employment.

From the start of its period in office in 1982, the conservative government led by Helmut Kohl made unmistakably clear that the “Moor” had done his duty and should return to Turkey, that Turks were not wanted in Germany, and would not be recognized as citizens enjoying equal rights. It was no coincidence that over the same period, Islamic groups emerged, such as Milli Görüs, which was founded in 1985. The influence of this group rose drastically after the pogroms and xenophobic attacks carried out in Rostock, Mölln and Solingen in the 1990s. The tendency to withdraw into the ghetto was not a consequence of excessive national tolerance, but rather state discrimination and state-encouraged racism.

Nor was this tendency the result of a “lack of readiness to integrate” on the part of the Muslims. In practice, better housing and jobs are not assigned to “foreigners”. And while politicians and the media express their outrage that children from the third generation of immigrants lack adequate understanding of the German language and receive no meaningful instruction due to the high proportion of foreigners in some primary schools, they have nothing to say about the cuts in public education. How can “German be spoken by everyone” (*Der Spiegel*), when funds are being slashed for the promotion and support of foreign children in schools and kindergartens?

The new immigration law set to come into force on January 1, 2005 is not aimed at promoting integration. Quite the opposite: foreigners are to be put under pressure and

harassed. German language courses, which they are obliged to attend by law—even if they have already lived in the country for a long time—are derisory.

In the interests of “a positive evaluation of the German state”, immigrants are given a miserly 30-hour orientation course. Following 600 hours of teaching, they are expected to be able to tackle bureaucratic letters both orally and in writing. This corresponds to about four terms at an adult education centre. Class sizes range up to 25, comprising pupils from different countries and generations, some of whom obtained only basic primary education in their country of birth. A sum of 2.05 euro per participant/ per hour has been allocated for such language schools. Those who fail to overcome the language barrier are threatened with the loss of social benefits and limitations on their residency permits.

In fact, the present debate has nothing to do with the furtherance of integration or equal rights for women. Rather, it is aimed at exploiting the defence of so-called “Western values” against “Islamic fundamentalism” to establish a new ideological basis for a society wracked by increasing social contradictions.

Conservative circles in Germany have evidently chosen to adopt the demagogic campaigns of US Republicans following the election victory of Bush as their model. Schavan was absolutely clear on this point: “[M]y central message is: we have an economic and cultural crisis in Germany. For me the debate on reforms and the debate on values belong together. We should not concentrate exclusively on questions of detail, but state and federal authorities’ policies must develop clear political principles aimed at protecting order. We must answer the question regarding what values this society has, and how it is shaped by these values, and how social cooperation can be supported. I am in favour of neither conservative nor liberal politics, but for politics based on Christian responsibility.”

To put it another way: the policy of welfare cuts is dividing society to such an extent, it is better to replace political argumentation by religious appeals. And religion, in turn, is merely a cover for chauvinism and moves towards a police state.



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