

Leading German politicians take up Thilo Sarrazin's anti-Islamic campaign

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Germany's two leading conservative parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Bavaria-based Christian Social Union (CSU), have taken up the campaign against Muslims initiated by social democrat Thilo Sarrazin of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) with his recently published book *Germany is Abolishing Itself*. Prominent conservative leaders, including the chairpersons of the CDU and CSU, Chancellor Angela Merkel and Horst Seehofer respectively, have defamed those practising the Muslim faith and challenged the fundamental right to freedom of thought and religion.

The template for this latest round of anti-Islamic propaganda was provided by the German president, Christian Wulff (CDU). In his speech on October 3, commemorating 20 years of German reunification, Wulff spoke at some length on the issue of integration, following fierce criticism by the media due to his silence during the Sarrazin debate.

Wulff tried to please everybody. On the one hand he reaffirmed "our Christian-Jewish history" and ranted against "multicultural illusions", which had continually underestimated the problems arising from "remaining dependent on state aid for long periods, crime rates, exertive masculinity, the refusal to accept educational opportunities and perform properly". On the other hand, he acknowledged the need for cultural diversity and openness "towards all those who come to us from all over the world".

Belonging to Germany should not be limited to "a passport, a family history or a faith". Christianity and Judaism undoubtedly belonged to Germany, Wulff said, "But in the meantime, Islam also belongs to Germany".

This last sentence was met with an immediate storm of protest from within the CDU and its sister party the CSU, although it had asserted just one fact: i.e., that, according to official estimates, 4 million Muslims currently live in Germany, many of them with a German passport.

Federal Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU) objected to any attempt by Wulff to award Islam similar status to the Christian-Jewish religions and cultural ideas. CSU deputy Norbert Geis declared: "We want to ensure that the Christian Western countries continue to remain Christian" and the chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, Volker Kauder (CDU), pronounced: "The German constitution (Basic

Law), based on our Christian-Jewish tradition, cannot be qualified. Especially not by an Islamism, which represents the Sharia and the suppression of women."

The Catholic bishop of Hamburg, Hans-Jochen Jaschke, took up the same theme in the *Bild-Zeitung*. Germany is marked by its Christian culture and tradition and "I will fight to ensure that we do not surrender these (values)", he told the paper.

Chancellor Angela Merkel then chipped in and spoke of the "determining power" of the Christian-Jewish tradition that reaches back "centuries, if not thousands of years". Islam is welcome in Germany, Merkel added, only "when it recognizes its obligation to our basic values". She then went on to declare that the perception of Islam in Germany is characterized by Sharia law and the lack of equal rights between men and woman, which finds its most extreme expression in the practice of so-called "honour killings".

The final touch on the whole debate was then provided by the Bavarian premier and CSU chairman, Horst Seehofer, who at the weekend demanded a stop to migration for Muslims. Seehofer told *Focus* magazine it was clear that "immigrants from other cultures such as Turkey and Arab countries have greater problems" and concluded, "we no longer required any additional immigration from other cultures".

The remarks directed against immigrants of Muslim faith by leading members of the German political establishment are an affront on a number of counts. At one and the same time they represent a complete distortion of history, a contempt for basic democratic rights and the embrace of crude and inhumane prejudices.

Kauder's statement that the Basic Law is based on the Christian-Jewish tradition is not only factually wrong, but is also an attack on the fundamental rights formulated in the constitution. Article 4 of the constitution declares the inviolability of "freedom of faith and of conscience, and the freedom to profess a religious or philosophical creed". It therefore follows that no religion may be discriminated against or granted privileges above any another. This point was stressed by the Federal Constitutional Court in a judgment in 1965: The state can only be the "domicile of all citizens" when it protects "ideological-religious neutrality" and refrains from "granting privileges to particular confessions".

In contrast to countries such as the US and France, which arose as the result of successful democratic revolutions, this principle, together with the separation of church and state, was never consistently carried out in Germany. The major Christian churches continue to receive privileges in Germany in the form of a church tax imposed by the state, the right for churches to instruct religion in state-run schools and church control of hospitals, kindergartens, confessional schools and other public institutions.

Now, however, when Kauder declares that the Basic Law in its entirety is a result of Christian tradition, he takes a further step backwards. The fundamental rights formulated in the Basic Law are not based on Christian traditions, but rather on the Enlightenment, which progressed largely in a struggle against the influence of religion and the church. Today the Catholic Church in particular remains a fortress of political reaction on such issues as equality between the sexes, the right to abortion, equal rights for homosexuals and other democratic principles.

As for the Jewish tradition, just 70 years ago the German state organized the most systematic extermination of the Jews in world history. Against this background any affirmation of Germany's alleged "Christian-Jewish tradition" in order to justify attacks on Islam represents the height of cynicism.

In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Stephan Kramer, the general secretary of the Central Council of the Jews in Germany, commented: "Politicians, who usually use the word 'Jewish' at most during the occasional Sunday speech, are now invoking the Christian-Jewish foundation of Germany with a barely imaginable vehemence." This can only be rated "unfortunately as an all too transparent attempt to draw Judaism in Germany into a battlefield against Islam".

The attempts to equate Islam with Sharia law and honour killing are just as dishonest. One could just as well seek to reduce Catholicism to paedophilia and exorcism. Both are still practised in the Catholic Church, but to regard every Catholic as a potential violator of children or practitioner of exorcism would represent a slander against an entire religious community. This is exactly what Merkel and Kauder do when they equate Islam with Sharia law and honour killings.

The alleged unwillingness of Muslims to integrate into German society, highlighted by Merkel and Kauder and also pointed to by the SPD chairman, Sigmar Gabriel, is also a myth. Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière has claimed that 10 to 15 percent of migrants refuse to integrate. A reporter for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* came to a very different conclusion. Following an investigation into immigrant communities in the city of Duisburg he wrote an article headed: "The unwilling amongst us are around one tenth of one percent."

The reporter spoke with those officials responsible for the city's predominantly Turkish immigrant community, who confirmed that integration and language courses were well attended and that, in fact, too few places existed for those seeking to attend.

While politicians have been loudly demanding that immigrants learn the German language, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) agreed to extensive cuts to such courses in July. Since then language courses have only been made available to those immigrants determined by the authorities. Anyone who applies voluntarily is put on a waiting list and must pay the course fees of €110.

While leading politicians seek to spread fears of Germany being swamped by foreigners, the fact is that immigration from Turkey has been declining for some time. The number of migrants returning to Turkey exceeded the number of immigrants in 2006 and this trend has been increasing ever since. Last year the total of those returning to Turkey exceeded those emigrating to Germany by the figure of 8,334.

The so-called German integration debate is nothing less than a smear campaign aimed at scapegoating Muslim immigrants and diverting attention from the increasing wave of social attacks being directed against the population as a whole. It represents a significant component of the campaign to create the basis for a new ultra-right party.

The current campaign calls to mind similar agitation carried out by the conservative parties together with the SPD following the reunification of Germany and a rapid rise in unemployment. Heribert Prantl noted in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that if one replaced the words "asylum" and "asylum-seeker" with "Islam" and "Muslim" then one would think that the current Sarrazin debate was merely a repetition of the debate held 20 years ago.

At that time, prominent politicians from the CDU-CSU and SPD campaigned against asylum-seekers in order to stir up xenophobia. The head of the Berlin CDU parliamentary faction, Klaus Landowsky, referred to asylum-seekers "going through the streets begging, cheating and stabbing with knives"—all at the taxpayers' expense. Encouraged by this campaign, neo-Nazis in the towns of Solingen and Mölln conducted arson attacks on Turkish families, resulting in many deaths and casualties.

The anti-Islamic campaign currently being waged by leading government spokespersons and politicians is pursuing a similar path.



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