



Religious toleration of Muslims in the German Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates public resistance towards Muslims' civil liberties, such as the wearing of headscarves, the provision of Islamic education and the building of mosques as well as the official recognition of Islam by creating a Islamic public holiday. Explanations were sought in negative perceptions and attitudes towards Muslims and individual value orientations. The main findings, based on path analysis and Mokken scale analysis of German 2009 survey data, are (1) that people differentiate between what they are asked to support, (2) that support for such restrictions exists among people with a negative as well as among people with a positive attitude towards Muslims, and (3) that individual value orientations have an independent effect on perceptions and attitudes towards Muslims and support for Muslims' civil liberties. The results of this study contribute to the understanding of the relation between prejudice and tolerance, as well as the current debates about practising Islam in Western societies.

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1. Introduction

Discussions on the recognition of diversity and equality in Western European societies are increasingly focused on religious diversity. Although religious freedom, tolerance, neutrality of the state and the freedom to practise one's faith are core principles of European societies, it is only in the recent decades that these societies have been confronted with a large minority group that does not share the religious beliefs of the majority population, and whose cultural practises and values go against the Western ideals of gender equality and non-discrimination (Alexander & Welzel, 2011; Hunter, 2002). Public discourse on, for example, the wearing of headscarves, the building of mosques and minarets and the ritual slaughter of animals, illustrates that tolerating and granting Muslims the freedom to practise their faith is not as self-evident as is often assumed. Repeatedly, the argument has been raised that the Western ideal of egalitarian gender relations and sexual liberation stands in sharp contrast with perceived unequal and patriarchal gender relations in Muslim communities. As such, the presence of Islam in Western countries has challenged the traditional character of European societies and the position of Islam is at the centre of fierce debates which focus on the tensions between the freedom of religion and the limits of tolerance. Recognition and respect for their beliefs and lifestyle enable minorities to feel part of their host society. Although this is an essential step for harmonious relations between groups within that society, the freedom and right to be different is limited by principles of equality, and by social norms that regulate relations within a society (Parekh, 2000). In other words, the right to be different cannot be used to defend discrimination on the basis of gender or sexual orientation.

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Muslims are now the largest religious minority in Western Europe (European Union Monitoring Centre, 2003) and the development of the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims is often seen among the most pressing issues of our time. The development of these relations – positive or negative – will have a determining impact on the social and political cohesion of western societies. A lack of recognition of Muslims' civil liberties may result in feelings of social exclusion and discrimination, which may, in extreme cases, result in radicalisation among Muslims (Frindte, Boehnke, Kreikenbohm, & Wagner, 2012), which in turn might lead to further resistance among non-Muslims, and so forth. Several studies have shown that west European countries are characterised by prevalent negative attitudes towards Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2005; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008; Van der Noll & Dekker, 2010; Velasco González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008). Tolerance, within the limits of what is acceptable in Western liberal societies, can play a role in keeping these negative attitudes from becoming negative behaviour and is, as such, the first step towards a civil society (Vogt, 1997).

This study examines tolerance towards Muslims, by means of the level of public support for the expression of Islam in the German public sphere. In addition, the study aims to explain the variation in public support for Muslims' civil liberties. The focus is on specific issues that relate to actual disputes concerning Islam in Germany with respect to dress code (wearing of headscarves¹), education (Islamic education in German public schools²) and practicing religion (building of mosques³) as well as the official recognition of Islam by means of an Islamic public holiday.⁴ Studying public opinion on recognition and support of Muslims' civil liberties is important, because it gives an indication of whether there is a basis for current and future legislations in favour of restricting Muslims' liberties. Furthermore, intimidation and oppression are not only the result of specific policies, but are often subtle and occur in everyday encounters, for example in the neighbourhood. People tend to pay more attention to their neighbours and peers, than they do to the actions and attitudes of policy makers (Gibson, 2006; McClosky & Brill, 1983).

1.1. Support for civil liberties: an aspect of tolerance

This study investigates public support for restricting Muslims' civil liberties. Civil liberties refer to rights that concern the freedom of individuals, such as the freedom to speak, publish, assemble, worship and the freedom to live by whatever moral, sexual or familial standards someone prefers (McClosky & Brill, 1983). Although people generally support democratic rights and liberties in the abstract, several studies have found that the specific application of these same rights is often rejected (Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995; Sullivan & Transue, 1999). Actual disputes concerning civil liberties are about specific issues, and judgements heavily depend on the contextual characteristics, such as which group, what act of expression, and in which particular context something is asked to be supported. Gieling, Thijs, and Verkuyten (2010) found, for example, that tolerance judgements partly depend on the domain to which the object of toleration appealed. Higher levels of tolerance were found for issues that could be defined as a matter of personal choice (for example, the wearing of headscarves), whereas significantly lower levels of tolerance were found for controversies that appealed to moral concerns – in their study conceptualised as a speech by an Imam condemning homosexuals as inferior. In a different study, Verkuyten and Slooter (2007) found that adolescent respondents in the Netherlands were less tolerant of Muslims than of a non-religious out-group. In addition, they revealed that tolerance judgements depend on the social implications of what the respondents were asked to tolerate. In a comparison of tolerance judgements for wearing headscarves (which only covers the hair) or face-covering veiling in schools, higher levels of tolerance were found for the scenario with smaller societal implications. Similarly, respondents were less supportive of a courthouse employee who wanted to wear a headscarf when the neutral

¹ In Germany, this debate is mainly focused on the question whether teachers are allowed to wear headscarves in German public school. Following the case of Fereshta Ludin, who was fired from her job as a teacher because of wearing a headscarf, the German constitutional court ruled that this was only allowed if there would be adequate federal legislation prohibiting the headscarf (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 2003). As a consequence, several federal states implemented legislation that prohibited either only the wearing of headscarves, or adopted a more secular approach which excludes the wearing of any visible religious symbols (Berghahn, 2008; Faas, 2010). See, for example, Shadid and Van Koningsveld (2005), McGoldrick (2006), and Nowak (2006) for more information on the debate on the wearing of headscarves.

² The German constitution stipulates that German public schools should provide religious education as part of the formal school curriculum, which is in accordance with the basic principles of the religious community (Grundgesetz, article 7). Muslim communities in Germany are very diverse and none of the groups has achieved the status of a public corporation. As a result, there are no people entitled to give Islamic education and, in addition, school officials often do not feel required to offer Islamic education (Fetzer & Soper, 2005). Consequently, the demand for Islamic religious education as a regular part of the curriculum in public school has often been denied (Duyvené de Wit & Koopmans, 2005).

³ The building of mosques in Germany generally meets resistance of the larger community. Typical concerns related to the building of mosques are increased noise and traffic, or the incompatibility with current urban planning. However, resistance towards the building of new mosques is also, directly or indirectly, associated with general fear and stereotypes of Islam, such as its link with violence and fundamentalism (Cesari, 2005). German Muslims especially face difficulties in obtaining a permit to build minarets as part of their mosques, and to use loudspeakers for the call of prayers from the minarets (Fetzer & Soper, 2005).

⁴ In November 2004 Christian Ströbele, member of parliament for the Green party, suggested that Germany should have an official Islamic holiday, for example Eid Al-Fitr which marks the end of the fasting period of Ramadan, as a sign of tolerance and appreciation for the over three million Muslims living in Germany. The proposal met a lot of opposition among other politicians, arguing that the official recognition of an Islamic holiday conflicts with the Western civilization and Christian traditions (Lutz, 2004). In 2009, the discussion about official Islamic holidays was revisited after a proposal from the chairman of the Turkish community in Germany. Once again, the proposal was met with criticism by politicians and key players of civil society (Weltonline, 2009).

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