

Press release

“Germans are much less tolerant of Muslims”

Survey on religious plurality in Europe shows delicate results in terms of integration politics

Berlin/Münster, 2. Dezember 2010 (exc) The Germans are much less tolerant of Muslims and other non-Christian religions than their Western European neighbours. This is the essential result of one of the largest representative surveys to date on religious plurality in Europe. The cluster of excellence “Religion and Politics” of the University of Münster, together with TNS Emnid, carried out this survey in five countries just before the controversy, brought about by Thilo Sarrazin, arose. According to the results, the Germans militate against new mosques and minarets much more often than the French, the Danes, the Dutch and the Portuguese, said the director of the study, religious sociologist Prof. Dr. Detlef Pollack, in Berlin on Thursday. “They are also less willing to concede equal rights to other religions. Compared to the other Europeans, their image of Hindus, Buddhists and Jews is more negative.”

“The differences between Germany and the other countries are downright dramatic when it comes to personal attitudes towards Muslims”, said the sociologist. While the majority of the Dutch, the French and the Danes think positively of Muslims (62 per cent, 56 per cent and 55 per cent, respectively), the same is only true for a German minority of 34 per cent (West) and 26 per cent (East). The research team found out that the most important reason for this is the frequency in contact: “The more often you meet Muslims, the more you view them as generally positive”, Pollack explained. In West Germany, some 40 per cent state to have at least a few contacts to Muslims, while only 16 per cent do so in East Germany. Contacts are most common in France, the country with the most positive image of Islam, amounting to 66 per cent. “If there were a terrorist attack now in Germany, as is being feared, this would also be dramatic considering the Muslims. The majority of the people would feel vindicated in their negative attitude”, Pollack said.

Germans’ fears are strong

According to the survey, only 49 per cent of respondents in West Germany and 53 per cent in East Germany think that all religious groups should have equal rights – in contrast to 72 per cent in Denmark, 82 per cent in the Netherlands, 86 per cent in France and 89 per cent in Portugal. 42 per cent of Germans state that practising Islam should be vigorously restricted. In the west of Germany, less than 30 per cent are in favour of the building of mosques; in the east, not even 20 per cent think so. Approval of the building of minarets or of the introduction of Muslim holidays is even lower. By contrast, more

than half of the population in Denmark argue for the building of mosques, some two thirds in France and the Netherlands, and in Portugal actually almost three quarters of the population.

Still, most Germans also want to give credit to non-Christian religions. In West Germany, a good 80 per cent agree with the declaration: "All religions must be respected"; in the other countries, some 90 per cent do so. Just as many people agree with the sentence: "If foreigners observe our laws, their religion does not matter." Expert Pollack said: "Among Germans there is a strong feeling of being threatened by Islam, but the Germans don't want to be unfair; the majority definitely does want to accept foreign cultures." The findings raise hope regarding political, social and cultural modes of organisation to relieve fears and reduce prejudices. "This has already been going on in the shadows for quite some time, as our survey shows. The debate Thilo Sarrazin has prompted with his provocative theses makes this sentiment more visible now."

The sociologists found out that personal contacts to Muslims, provided that they come about, are mostly rated as positive in all countries. "Some three quarters of West Germans and two thirds of East Germans report that they had perceived encounters with Muslims as pleasant." The Dutch and the Danes share this opinion, and even more of the French look upon such encounters favourably. "The only problem is that such contacts are much more scarce in Germany than they are in the other countries", said the study's director. He emphasised that no factor was as decisive as the frequency of contact. "According to our data, competition for jobs or envy towards foreigners only play a minor role." The researchers had carried out a so-called regression analysis in order to detect the factors influencing the view on other religions.

"No honest debate in Germany yet"

"The differences between the countries are bound to alarm politics and society in Germany", said Pollack. Besides the lack of contact, the reason for the intolerant stance on Muslims, according to the religious sociologist, was that Germany has not yet had an honest and intensive public debate about Islam and integration. Triggered by severe conflicts with Muslims – the cartoon controversy in Denmark, the violent outbursts in suburbs of Paris, the assassination of the Dutch Islam critic Theo van Gogh –, the neighbouring countries have for quite some time discussed the issue in public. The emergence of right-wing populist parties in the 1990s has also been a reason for the discussions. In addition, due to their historical legacy from the colonial period, nations such as France or Portugal were more experienced in dealing with foreigners, said Pollack.

According to the experts, it is all the more important that German politics will react sensitively to the people's sentiments in the future. "Given these survey results, those who say that 'Islam is part of our culture' will polarise. It would be better to say: 'Muslims are part of our culture'", said Pollack. It would now be a topic for education, information and a matter of conducting an open-minded dialogue to influence the people's attitudes.

On behalf of the cluster, the polling institute TNS Emnid interviewed 1,000 people each in East and West Germany, France, Denmark, Portugal and the Netherlands. (vwm)

The Selection of the Countries

The selection of the five countries was based on the varying degrees of religious plurality: the sociologists selected Germany due to the large number of Muslims and because the conflicts about mosques and headscarves are on the rise. As there are much fewer Muslims in East Germany than in the West, the two parts of the country were investigated separately. The researchers brought in Portugal as a contrast as religious plurality is less pronounced there. They were interested in secular France due to the discussions about the burka ban and the social tensions between young Muslims and the majority society. The Netherlands came to the fore because their image of a tolerant society has been shaken ever since the assassination of Islam critic Theo van Gogh. The researchers assumed that Denmark's relationship with Islam has changed due to the cartoon controversy.

More Results from the Study on Religious Plurality

Is Islam misogynous, fanatic and prone to violence?

The respondents' image of Islam is equally negative in all five countries. For instance, some 80 per cent of the population of all nations think of discrimination against women when hearing the word "Islam". Approximately 70 per cent associate fanaticism with Islam, some 60 per cent proneness to violence, a little more than half of them bigotry. The criticism is much more moderate in France only.

Is Islam peaceful and tolerant?

If the respondents are given positive attributes to choose from, a clear difference between Germany and the other countries emerges. Less than 5 per cent of Germans ascribe tolerance to Islam, whereas more than 20 per cent of the populations in Denmark, France and the Netherlands do so. Only 5 to 8 per cent of Germans attribute peaceableness and respect for human rights to Islam. This evaluation is also negative in the other countries; the agreement with this statement, however, amounts to a maximum of 30 per cent.

Should Islam adapt to the West?

Although the European neighbouring countries concede more rights to the Muslims as the Germans do, as regards the building of mosques for example, they also demand a higher degree of cultural adaptation. Significantly more than 80 per cent in all of the five countries agree with the statement "that the Muslims have to adapt to our culture".

Christianity as cultural basis?

The Germans agree with their neighbours in that they consider Christianity to be the basis of their culture. Some 70 per cent take this view, the share only being lower in de-churched East Germany. A minority of approx. 20 per cent believes that Islam is suitable for the Western world. In France, too, the agreement does not exceed a mere 30 per cent.

So the Christian character of culture is beyond dispute for the people in Germany, the Netherlands, France and Denmark.

Threatened by foreign cultures?

The question whether one's own country is threatened by foreign cultures is affirmed by two fifths in West Germany. In East Germany, half of the respondents agree. The feeling of being threatened by foreign cultures in West Germany is about as strong as it is in Denmark, France and in the Netherlands; in East Germany, it is above the average level of the neighbouring countries investigated.

Does religious plurality produce conflict or cultural enrichment?

More than 70 per cent of respondents in West and East Germany, in Denmark and the Netherlands are convinced that the increasing plurality of religious groups is a source of conflict; in France, only 59 per cent think so. In West Germany, just over 50 per cent are willing to agree to the statement that religious plurality is culturally enriching; in the East, the share of those who think so is even a little less than that. In the other countries, however, this share amounts to around 80 per cent. Hence, tensions arising from the fact that followers of different religious beliefs live together are regarded similarly in all countries. However, openness towards foreign religions and cultures is much higher in France, Denmark, the Netherlands and also in Portugal.

And what do the people think about Jews, Buddhists and Hindus?

As to the attitude towards Jews, Buddhists and Hindus, the German population at first glance seems to take up a more open-minded stance than it does towards Muslims. Its majority has a positive attitude towards followers of these three religions. Still, the differences compared to Denmark, France and the Netherlands are again considerable, amounting to 15 to 20 percentage points. The stance on Muslims in all countries is more negative than on Buddhists, Hindus or Jews. In Germany, however, the general opinion is noticeably more critical. (vwm)

Photo: religious sociologist, Prof. Dr. Detlef Pollack

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"Religion and Politics" – The Cluster of Excellence of WWU Münster

Some 200 academics from 20 disciplines and eleven countries do research in the cluster of excellence "Religion and Politics" of the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität (WWU) Münster. They deal with the sensitive relationship of religion and

politics from Antiquity to the present and from Latin America and Europe to the Arab and the Asian world. It is nationally the largest research association of its kind and of the 37 clusters of excellence in Germany, it is the only one to deal with religions. The federal government and the state governments support the project within the scope of the Excellence Initiative with 37 million euros until 2012. (vvm)