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Cultural Brokers & Syncretic Solutions: Lessons from Converts to Minority Religions

or

“What do German Muslim Converts have to do with
Peacebuilding and Integration?”



INTRODUCTION - Muslims in Germany and Social Cohesion

On the 20th anniversary of German reunification, President Christian Wulff spoke of the need for a second process of German unification: this time with foreigners living inside the country.

“First and foremost, we need to adopt a clear stance: an understanding that for Germany, belonging is not restricted to a passport, a family history, or a religion. Christianity doubtless belongs in Germany. Judaism belongs doubtless in Germany. That is our Judeo-Christian history. But by now, Islam also belongs in Germany.” (Rohan, 2010).

A few weeks later, Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that “Multiculturalism has utterly failed in Germany” and that “Muslims must obey the constitution rather than Sharia law if they want to live in Germany”. She went on to argue that it was an illusion to think that Germans and foreign workers could “live happily side by side” (Smee, 2010).

This tension presents a challenge, and some interesting research questions. Merkel summarized one perspective in the heated national debates on immigration and integration policy. Contradictory perspectives are also being offered by others who believe multiculturalism is working, and is preferable over assimilation models. Given the lively competition between these views, it can be challenging to reconcile her remarks with those of the German president. There was tremendous tension building, long before her speech, making it important to understand the background and history before the inflammatory statements that have recently come from both within her ruling coalition¹, and without². The divisive public and political discourse has lead several commentators to declare that the country is now effectively re-divided, ironically over questions of social cohesion (Smee, 2010; Modood, 2010).

¹ Horst Seehofer (CSU) said in a *Focus* interview "It is clear that immigrants from other cultures such as Turkey and Arabic countries have more difficulties (with integration)," and "From that I draw the conclusion that we don't need additional immigration from other cultures." (FOCUS, September 2010)

² Thilo Sarrazin (SPD) ignited the new round of debate, with an inflammatory book “Germany does itself in” (2010) in which he accused Muslims of “sponging off welfare, refusing to integrate and not attaining high enough levels of education”. He also said that Turks were "conquering Germany ...through a higher birthrate." The book first released in August, topped the 2010 annual best-seller list.

Overview:

Rephrasing Merkel’s declaration makes for an interesting rhetorical point of departure: Has multiculturalism failed in Germany? Is assimilation the only alternative as Esser (2009) and others have asserted? Or are there other ways to define and understand the problem(s) and solutions? Beginning with these challenges, I will summarize my research on German converts to Islam and their integration into Muslim minority communities. This paper will simultaneously focus on some of the key themes of the Ankara Conference on Peacebuilding & Conflict Resolution, specifically reconciling conflict in societies through intercultural dialogue and fostering religious understanding in the following order.

I. Challenge(s) – Assimilation vs. Integration. In identifying the core problem(s), it becomes evident that the challenges in Germany’s immigration/integration debate are similar to those in the conversion discourse, where a “poverty of distinction” prevails. This portion addresses whether the “integration vs. assimilation” discussion is relevant or productive. Studying German converts reveals how both concepts are utilized as strategies for acculturation and both have potential for conflict resolution.

II. Approach – Incorporating multiple perspectives and identities. Concepts introduced in this section are aimed at overcoming current blindspots and deficits in both discourses. Insights from German converts’ experiences can bridge gaps between the majority and minority.

III. Findings – What are the roles of immigrant (religious) organizations and institutions? Esposito (2007) asked rhetorically, “Who speaks for Islam?” In Germany the answer to a large extent is a broad variety of ethnic German Muslim converts. Findings from my PhD research highlight the prominent roles that converts play can play as “cultural brokers” in leading and coordinating the activities of many (immigrant) Muslim associations, for peacebuilding, promoting dialogue and alleviating tensions.

IV. Syncretic Solutions – This segment will highlight the idea of “clumsy” solutions as an alternative to the elegant approaches that dominate the current debate. I will also contrast this concept by introducing more deliberate “syncretic solutions”, which are inclusive by design, incorporating plural rationalities and multiple perspectives. Finally, I will conclude by highlighting descriptions and discussion of some inclusive Islamic approaches and secular alternatives such as those championed by social entrepreneurs, highlighting some best practices that might assist in efforts to generate creative, sustainable solutions.

I. Challenge(s): Elegance and Polarization - Has Multiculturalism Failed?

Germany, like many other countries has experienced problems and successes related to immigration and integration, but following Merkel's aforementioned remarks the debate has become increasingly polarized. One problem with the “assimilation vs. integration” discussion is that it is reductionist in nature. Has multiculturalism failed? Or is it succeeding? Reviewing prominent arguments advanced by social scientists on both sides, reveal numerous contested terms and issues co-mingled within the integration debate, which contribute to the complicated disconnect between two dominant sides. Each has comprehensive, elegant ideas about how to define the problems and what the preferred solutions are. A few of the frequently cited arguments will be briefly reviewed to provide illustrative examples of the prevalent polemic approaches.

Most of the debate in Germany hinges around Muslim immigrants. Abdullah, (2009) argued, “no comprehensive discussion on integration policy in Germany can occur without simultaneously including a discussion about Islam”. It can be helpful to include religious considerations, but these issues also inject emotional intensity with competing ideas (sometimes accusations) about religious sources of social friction. Complex issues are sometimes reduced to monolithic depictions of German society struggling against a similarly united global Muslim

Umma.

Multiculturalism as a failure - Many social scientists like Esser reject the multiculturalism approach, but for a variety of reasons. Criminologists Pfeifer and Baier (2010) generated controversy with claims that correlate religiosity in Islam with propensity for violent crime among youth in Germany (an effect they claim is not observable in other religions). Steinberg (2009), of the German *Stiftung fuer Wissenschaft und Politik* has also equated Muslims with criminals, generalizing that most German converts to Islam “..are unstable young people with a past of petty crimes” (Steinberg, 2009). Uhlmann, (2010) implied that increases in conversion to Islam parallel increases in terrorism, and research from feminists like Schwarzer (2010) have held Islam responsible for violent and repressive cultural practices, whereas Spueller-Stegemann (2003) emphasized the concept of Muslim immigrants creating parallel societies. These scholars tend to be skeptical about a mutual future with Muslim immigrants and tend to advocate solutions based on assimilation theories.

Numerous German politicians have also contributed to what has been called the “securitization of Islam” (Cesari, 2009). Oezyuerek (2009) documents the trend of policy makers warning about the dangers of Muslim converts, both before and after the failed plot of the infamous Sauerland Cell. Several have also analyzed proposals for the government to register and surveil all who have converted to Islam (Kuechen, 2007; Ringel, 2007)

Multiculturalism Succeeding? On the otherhand, Schiffauer (2008) criticized the parallels between crime and Islam, calling this line of thinking the “Islamization of social problems”. He rejects the notion that religion is the causal factor, but instead point to systematic social disadvantages and failings in education and employment policy as driving factors, not Islam. Oezyuerek (2007) argued, “Rather than being a threat, ethnic German converts to Islam are in fact a very valuable asset to Germany, they serve as a bridge between immigrant Muslims and non-

Muslims in Germany, and by doing so they help to create a well-integrated German society” (Ozyurek, 2007).

Others have argued that the 1950s and the days of a homogenous culture in Germany are long gone (Beck-Gernsheim, 2009) and '*multikulti*' cannot fail, as it is now a fact of life (Altun, 2010). They see millions of well-integrated Muslim immigrants throughout the EU as evidence for Tariq Ramadan's (2004) argument that integration has already been accomplished, but as he has repeatedly argued (2010), ‘Europeans are not willing to accept Muslims’ as legitimate contributing members of society. These thinkers have argued for the value of recognizing and preserving cultural diversity and tend to embrace affirmative philosophies.

Beyond Polemics- The political discourse is also dramatically influenced by outspoken and polarizing figures like feminist Necla Kelek, or the famous former professional boxer turned Salafi preacher Pierre Vogel (also known as Abu Hamza). Both motivate ardent supporters and stark opposition. Another possibility has been advocated by those in favor of getting past bipolar approaches and moving “beyond the politics of friend and enemy” Shryock (2010). “Too often social scientists create needless controversies by seizing upon one side of a dualism and proclaiming it the more important.” (Thompson, et al, 1990). Many policy actors advocate for more dialogue, but I will argue that in order to be fruitful there is first a need to pluralize the discussion (and analysis) to avoid the current reductionist norm which is more of a shouting match than a conversation.³

While the public and political discourses often emphasize distinctions between ‘natives’ and ‘foreigners’, the reality is that neither group is homogenous. Studying German converts presents a unique opportunity to examine a distinct group that clearly bridges the gap between minority and

³ Often referred to as “dialogue of the deaf”, Ney, 2009 points out, this is “a horribly inaccurate and unkind description of the way the hearing impaired communicate. Feminists may argue that 'lads down at the pub' may be a more accurate representation of policy conflict in which everyone holds strong opinions, likes to articulate them at high volumes and cares little for what anyone else has to say” (p.21)

majority, and Germans and Muslims. They are part of both, and are often ambivalent about their relationships and multiple identities. Each culture is fractal in nature and contested, making it essential to pluralize the discussion, understanding evidence from the dominant perspectives but also incorporating additional ways of looking at the issues, which reveal more nuanced perceptions of problems both real and imagined. Each view can be plausible and rational, but only captures a portion of reality, neglecting to account for all available information. All sides run the risk of building the existing policy debates on faulty foundations.

Instead of “assimilation versus integration” I argue it is more productive to inquire about assimilation *and* integration. There is evidence among German converts to suggest that reality reflects both patterns, which occur simultaneously in the lives of individuals and social groups. Monolithic understandings contribute to narrow thinking and elegant policy failures.

II. Approach - Incorporating Multiple Perspectives and Identities

In order to address the challenge(s) identified above, this exploratory study set out to pluralize the discussion, by pursuing more inclusive approaches, and challenging dualist paradigm(s). Building on theoretical ideas and typologies of anthropologist Mary Douglas and sociologist Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (1999a) the study of German converts can offer a number of insights, including the idea some converts might be best understood as “symbolic immigrants.” She explained how “individuals who feel stigmatized or alienated by their own culture sometimes emigrate culturally, often without leaving their country” (Wohlrab-Sahr, 2002). She also compared American and German converts to Islam (in one of only a few academic studies on German converts) who are especially relevant to the integration discussion because they challenge implicit notions of mutual exclusivity between being German or Muslim. They have provided unique insights into the ways

the Muslim minority immigrant communities integrate new members (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999b).

Building on Wohlrab-Sahr's work and typology, the symbolic immigrant metaphor is only part of learning more about German converts' experiences, in order to shed light on their strategies and some of the “Islamic” approaches toward integration. The scope of the project also included a more comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis, involving the Cultural Theory framework as a methodological tool (as applied in previous political science work) to identify the competing policy stories in the integration and immigration debates. The empirical data also includes individual conversion stories and examples of how converts, due to their ability to shift between multiple cultures and identities are often able to effectively mediate and negotiate between Muslims and Germans.

In order to systematically evaluate the data, and to provide a framework for understanding the overlap between conversion to Islam, integration and immigration in Germany I have relied in part on the theory of socio-cultural viability, shortened as “Cultural Theory” (Thompson et al., 1990). This theory synthesizes a number of existing social theories and explains how societies and groups organize themselves and how people relate to each other, claiming four main types of social organization, called “rationalities” or “ways of life.” Each way of life can be considered rational, but emphasizes a different understanding of human nature and the natural world. The typology and implications are described in detail throughout my dissertation. One key insight from this theoretical orientation is the concept of clumsy solutions. That is, that the best solutions to social problems require careful consideration of all four ways of life. Policies tend to fail when dominated by one perspective that marginalizes or excludes alternative worldviews.

Many scholars that do not necessarily subscribe to cultural theory have identified similar concepts. Jocelyne Cesari, a leading scholar on Muslim integration in Europe, recently said, “Only when we listen more and dictate less to Muslims will we achieve better relations with Muslims

including better integration in the West, and more progress abroad” (Cesari, 2010). Similarly, others have argued for more differentiated approaches, identifying clear and distinct subgroups within Islam (Gregorian, 2003; Schwarz, 2010; Schurz, 2010).

On a related note, one major factor in the formation of my approach was a desire to reverse the traditional direction of inquiry and include overlooked or marginalized viewpoints. Many studies on migration focus on the incorporation of minority groups into the societal majority. Gaining an understanding of converts requires a different kind of research about processes moving in the opposite direction. I have tried to fill that gap by focusing on individuals who have transitioned from the cultural mainstream to join Muslim minority groups. In doing so, they acquire new identities, but they do not necessarily abandon their values or previous identity.

Wohlrab-Sahr (1999a) and Razaq (2008) have both expressed this idea, distinguishing between conversion and “alternation”. They argue that the term conversion refers to “the radical changes of worldviews and identities, linked with an exclusive relationship towards the past and former commitments” (Razaq, 2008 p.22) whereas “alternation refers to less radical forms of religious and ideological change that are more inclusive regarding former commitments.” (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999, p.353). This presents a less conflictive mode of change, without the necessity of breaking with the past, and offers an alternative concept to many of the mutually exclusive binary notions about conversion that tend to dominate the sociology of religion. Based on my interview data it seems most converts are very comfortable switching between their multiple identities. What they are uncomfortable with is feeling artificially coerced to choose between their identities. Many in fact could not or would not answer the question of whether their German or Muslim identity was their primary or preferred point of reference. Most only (reluctantly) answered that identity was often a context driven fluid notion.

With all this in mind, I set out to collect, analyze, and relay (anonymized) stories from a

small but unique religious minority. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 42 German Muslim converts (25 men and 17 women),⁴ usually in their own homes, but sometimes in their mosques, offices, or public locations. The youngest was 19, and the oldest was 75 years old, and their time as a Muslim ranged from 2 weeks to 51 years. Most interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. After beginning locally, the sample expanded via referrals, using a traditional snowball sampling approach. Most participants were eager to share personal stories, relating details from before, during, and after conversion to Islam. Each discussed dozens of issues, including lifestyle changes, family and professional lives, politics, gender, identity, orthopraxy, etc.

The data come alive with personal stories, which add feelings and dimensions to many otherwise abstract issues. Some were surprising and dramatic, others were more routine and predictable; but all included accounts of overcoming challenges and most offered evidence of shifting back and forth between their multiple identities. Only a few subjects described a complete break with their past. My impression was that these abrupt transitions were also accompanied by some of the most extreme challenges and difficulties, some of which appeared self-inflicted. Others with more flexibility seemed to be more actively involved as the kind of “bridgebuilders” described by Oezyuerk (2007) working toward constructive dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Germans, and actively involved in creating and implementing innovative answers to social challenges.

After data collection, all recorded interviews were anonymized and fully transcribed. The variety among responses further reinforced important notions of cultural heterogeneity among Muslims, and not just along national or ethnic lines. In “A poverty of distinction”, Thompson and Wildavsky (1986) used Cultural Theory to argue against policies that effectively lump all poor people together. “Homogenizing the poor ...is not only dehumanizing but also makes them

⁴ Eight respondents did not consent to recording, but still agreed to tell their story and answer questions. These were not included in the final sample, which was eventually limited to just 30 interviews.

candidates for a single set of public policies”. As an alternative they used Cultural Theory to describe four distinct types of poverty. My preliminary analysis found a similar deficit of differentiation when it comes to integration policies and the literature on conversion to Islam. There is evidence of four distinct and competing policy stories, but the dominant voices appear to drown out some viewpoints, leaving significant blindspots. Patterns predicted by Cultural Theory were also readily apparent among conversion experiences and rationales, which reinforced my desire to utilize Cultural Theory to show different types of experiences with Islam, and how converts use different strategies in coping with social challenges. Mars (2010) specifically argued that even though Cultural Theory is typically applied to institutions and used to analyze social groupings, it is readily adaptable to other contexts, including individual level of analysis. Cultural Theory's claims about people, especially the idea of “multiple selves” or plural identities seem to be strongly supported by the empirical data collected on German converts to Islam.

Just as many converts show evidence of alternation and fluid shifting between multiple identities, there is also evidence of four different collective approaches, or rationalities toward conversion. These cultures of conversion are evident from the data collected in the study and these types can be mapped onto Cultural Theory's four ways of life. I also found evidence suggesting a fifth possibility, called “autonomy” which is also anticipated by Cultural Theory.

The range of cross-disciplinary research supported by this theoretical framework was helpful in my efforts to integrate social sciences and adopt an approach with strong interdisciplinary precedents. The selection of Cultural Theory was reinforced as the versatility of the approach proved valuable when connecting fields that appear distinct, but offer ample overlap. Some of the precedents utilizing the theory have covered a broad range of topics and cases. From its origins in anthropology (Douglas, 1978), it has also been used in public policy (Wildavsky, 1979; Schwarz & Thompson, 1990; Hood, 1998), political science (Thompson et al., 1999; Ney, 2009), and sociology

of religion (Almond et al., 2003).

III. Findings – Cultural Brokers

Muslim immigrant institutions have come to play increasingly important roles in the integration policy in Germany. They negotiate reforms, promote minority rights through legal challenges and continue to participate in the formation and implementation of several key federal policy initiatives like Germany's the annual *Islamkonferenz* and the Integration Summit. My research provides dozens of examples of German converts playing pivotal roles as “cultural brokers” within most significant organizations on all levels by founding new groups, leading existing ones, and promoting the proliferation of Islam through a range of Da'wa initiatives. Each of these contributions will be briefly discussed.

Founding new groups – German converts have played significant roles in the formation of several key organizations at local, state and national levels. Their efforts included helping local Muslims communities legally register as official recognized associations, and uniting multiple communities and umbrella organizations to represent collective Muslim interests. These bridgebuilders are still aware of the internal divisions, but seem to have fewer reservations reaching across ethnic, cultural or sectarian lines, recognizing that “just because we disagree does not mean we are dissimilar” (Mueller, 2009). Converts were involved in, or directly responsible for, the formation of several new and important Muslim umbrella organizations. Examples include many of the state and local *Schura* (Council) organizations, the ZMD (Central Council of Muslims in Germany) as alternative to the dominant Turkish organizations, and the DML (German Muslim League). Even the national level super umbrella organization the *Koordinationsrat* is influenced

and partially lead by converts.⁵

Leading Muslim Organizations - Many German converts have taken on literal and symbolic leadership roles, and are among the best known Muslims in Germany. In addition to the aforementioned organizations, converts are involved in leading institutions like the ZIIAD (Central Islam Institute Archive of Germany), and interfaith dialogue forums like the CIG (Christian-Islamic Society) and JCM (an interfaith organization of Jews Christians and Muslims). Many Germans now regularly lead prayers in Muslim immigrant communities, including Halima Krausen, a female Imam who leads the German speaking community at the famous, historic Islamic center of Hamburg. Many converts are well-educated, experienced, and well-versed in Islam. They express confidence and comfort in their leadership roles, serving as Imams or members of the local leadership committees. Others have informal leadership roles in publications, with prominent and productive examples like Ahmed von Denfer who has been responsible for many German translations of Islamic texts. Former diplomat Murad Hoffman’s works have highlighted many converts who are still active as Islamic publishers (Hoffman, 1998). He has also taken a leading role in promoting intellectual arguments and defenses of Islam (Razaq, 2008). Others have used their professional expertise and social standing as scientists, doctors, and lawyers to promote Islam and interfaith dialogue on multiple levels.

Da'wa – One famous Muslim preacher Pierre Vogel (also a convert, and also known as Abu Hamza) and his organization EZP (*Einladung zum Paradies*, or invitation to paradise) are actively involved in *da'wa* – or the “call to Islam” and claim to be responsible for hundreds of conversions each year. Some Muslims prefer the ideas of calling or inviting Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and some object to the “missionary” label. A number of researchers have investigated the Muslim

⁵ Yurdakal (2009) and Rosenow (2009) have both analyzed how these organizations differ in their membership, strategies, and priorities.

marketing and recruitment phenomenon, and the prevalence and efficacy of converts in these programs (Wiedel, 2008; Rietz, 2009; Gugler, 2009, 2010). The intimate familiarity of converts with both cultures allows them to effectively reach both audiences. Recent developments by converts in this area include an increase in tech-savvy tools for new Muslims and potential recruits including many new websites, video repositories, podcasts, blogs, matchmaker/marriage services, apps for mobile devices and even hotline numbers where non-Muslim Germans can call for answers to questions on Islam or receive assistance converting over the telephone (Bunt, 2009).

Converts as “Cultural Brokers” - In addition to leading, promoting and representing various forms of Islam, many converts describe functioning as role mediators between Muslims and German society contributing to the overarching theme of informal cultural diplomats. They help and teach their immigrant friends and associates to make intentional decisions about what to accept and what to reject in German society. This closely resembles Pipher's (2002) concept of cultural brokers. She argues that cultural brokers help ease people into each other's cultures, by giving information that empowers minorities. Additional research would be needed to confirm if the immigrants perceive the same benefits, but many German converts at least feel they are contributing to integration with their time, knowledge, linguistic proficiency, education and even financial support of their Muslim communities.

The empirical data compiled from the interviews also provides an ethnographic sketch of German Muslim converts, drawn from dozens of stories about challenges German converts face and conveys some intimate knowledge about their thought processes and preferred solutions. Repeated examples of cross-cultural and interfaith bridge-building reinforce the notion that converts frequently function as effective cultural brokers. German converts to Islam can act as a tremendous catalyst for social change. Given their relatively small numbers, they often have an impact disproportionate to their numbers in both their old and new communities. Despite the great

potential, many converts appear underutilized as a resource for peacebuilding and alleviating tensions related to immigration and integration. This may also warrant additional research and consideration, given their potential to influence policy implementation and outcomes on all levels.

In contrast to dozens of positive empirical examples of converts assisting with the nuances of culture, there are many converts who consciously reject and even resent this role. One prominent German Muslim (who wished to remain anonymous) emphatically stated “I am *not* a social worker” (Interview, #34, 2010). He described going through a period of “mosque hopping” in an effort to avoid his newfound popularity and frequent requests for help, everything from translation of bills and letters to requests for assistance to accompanying Muslim immigrants to local bureaucracies to resolve complicated immigration and legal issues. His outburst was perhaps indicative of the tensions that also exist between born Muslims and converts. A few immigrant Muslim leaders confessed that there is some resentment among born Muslims toward converts who seem to think they know everything better.⁶

One of the results from the research is a modified and expanded framework that builds upon results of the implicit typology advanced by Wohlrab-Sahr's (1999) study of converts. The outcome that emerges is consistent and compatible with her findings and synthesizes insights from several other theoretical approaches, such as the strategies outlined by Neo-Institutionalism (Rosenow, 2009) and Relational Models Theory (Fiske, 2010). Wohlrab-Sahr described three basic types of converts to Islam, and although she did not specifically use Cultural Theory to derive these types, there are striking similarities between her descriptions and the data that emerged in my findings. Both sets of data show evidence of distinct hierarchical, egalitarian, and fatalistic rationalities toward conversion. I also found evidence of a fourth viable pattern, an individualistic rationality, as a type of conversion that appears to describe another observable possibility for conversion

⁶ Oezyurek (2009) also described the ambivalence many German converts feel toward immigrant Muslims.

experiences. The analysis has also yielded several parallels between individual experiences with conversion to Islam and the rationalities or ways of life described by Cultural Theory, which also offers a more detailed explanation for different kinds of change and the surprises or personal crises that motivate change. These findings may warrant additional investigation, and have prompted suggestions for potential future research to test these results.

IV. Syncretic Solutions - Alternatives to elegance

Interviews with converts often yielded suggestions and recommendations for integration solutions. Sometimes they were described indirectly when reflecting on the “best practices” they experienced themselves as newcomers within Muslim communities. Others were more explicit about contrasting and advancing specific ideas that differed from current policy approaches toward integration. One specific example came from a minority within the minority. The Ahmadiyya Muslims have a robust *Da'wa* program for recruiting new Muslims, and they are equally interested in retaining them. Their integration efforts center around an idea they call *Muachaat* (a form of “brotherliness” or fraternity). They encourage each community to provide an immediate support system for each convert by assigning a *Patenschaft* (Godfatherhood or sponsorship). Essentially a targeted friendship and partnership that implies responsibility and accountability as a means to facilitate ongoing learning and resolution of questions, concerns and/or cultural differences. Providing an immediate point of contact also offers a guide or cultural interpreter for new Muslims. Ideally this connection is intended to become a lasting relationship, with each convert having at least one new friend or mentor to ease the transition into their new way of life and identity. The concept is based on a *haddith*, (story of the Prophet) from a time in early Islamic history when the cultures and societies of Medina and Mecca were being merged. Muhammad encouraged a similar system of brotherly partnerships to resolve and prevent conflict. Abdullah Uwe Wagishauser, the

Emir over the Ahmadiyya communities in Germany, (himself a German convert) claims the approach has proven effective in their religious community and has been mutually beneficial as a form of exchange for all participants who learn to appreciate each other’s culture and background more profoundly. This could be a model for wider societal use.

While this approach is implemented through religious organizations, near the end of my research I came across “MeMi” (Mentors for Migrants) a local organization utilizing a similar concept to facilitate integration, which offers a pattern for one possible clumsy solution to integration challenges. The term “clumsiness” may be misleading, as it sounds as deceptively simple, as if the solution might occur by happenstance. While occasionally organizations may stumble onto success through serendipitidy, more often than not, it is very difficult to balance competing interests and approaches to achieve creative and flexible combinations of the different ways of organizing, perceiving and justifying social relations. An awareness of this theoretical ideal can promote efforts to create more deliberate blends through “syncretic solutions”. Syncretism has been defined as, “the attempted reconciliation or union of different or opposing principles, practices, or parties, as in philosophy or religion” or alternatively, “the merging, as by historical change in a language, of two or more categories in a specified environment into one.” (Webster, 1913). This term seems to more accurately capture the possibility of actively creating or seeking out syncretic solutions.

MeMi organizes and facilitates intercultural friendship and mentoring, primarily between families. When I interviewed the founder of the organization, Diana Altun, they had already worked with over 140 families and was recognized three consecutive years by the Federal Agency for Migrants and Refugees (BAMF or *Bundesagentur fuer Migranten und Fluchtlinge*). MeMi made efforts to expand use of their model, which was being applied for reconciliation in North Ireland conflict areas, and a similar model was adapted and adopted for integration efforts in Basel,

Switzerland. It is not a perfect model, but enjoys an overwhelmingly high success rate. Perhaps most importantly, it is easily replicable as a form of micro-level cultural diplomacy and deliberately incorporates principles that appeal to each of the four rationalities, which will be briefly described below:

Hierarchical social institutions are involved due to the federal funding and BAMF reporting requirements and support especially through annual inspections, expert reviews and feedback. MeMi is also implicitly promoting an understanding of traditional German values while still showing a willingness to learn from other approaches. The preservation or transmission of tradition is highly valued in hierarchical social settings.

Egalitarian elements are evident in the implementation and level playing field that essentially treats mentors and mentees as equal partners. The emphasis is on local encounters and community building. The project is relatively small in scope, and the means are low-tech, with no environmental impact. The aspects of MeMi that bring people together and focus on relationships is also a benefit that impacts society, as the egalitarian rationality emphasizes a belief that human nature is inherently oriented toward sharing and caring.

Fatalists (alternatively also sometimes labeled as “familists”) can appreciate the family focus and the limited scope of cooperation. They also see advantages to individuals and approve of the appeals to self-interest, especially those willing to adapt and adjust. MeMi 's informal agreements based on the handshake allows for cynics and skeptics to get involved at minimal personal risk, and provides the impersonal distance of non-contractual affiliation, which is another attractive point for this rationality.

Individualism is evident in the risk-taking, pioneering spirit of the innovative start-up. The founder describes flexibility with the rules, adapting to individual circumstances, like allowing individuals to participate or illegal/undocumented immigrants being permitted to participate

anonymously or under pseudonym. The program director has specifically mentioned how the program appeals to many on the basis of a cost/benefit analysis or “rational choice”, and suggested that those with the individual entrepreneurial spirit often subscribe to this “survival of the fittest” thinking. MeMi has made initial efforts to generate consulting revenue and to secure independent funding. This may provide an interesting test, to see if the program can remain sustainable with or without federal sponsorship.

These descriptions of various elements of clumsiness are not intended as prescriptive approach, but are intended as a potentially helpful illustrative example. Although a relatively small organization based on a simple concept, by all accounts (especially testimonials from participants on all sides) MeMi has made a significant local impact and reached a broad target audience. Founded and run by several individuals with mixed Turkish-German heritage and so-called “migration backgrounds”, this example shows how Muslims and migrants can be viewed and utilized as part of the solution(s). The outcomes suggest the need for a broader, differentiated understanding of heterogeneous minority and Muslim communities, within which German converts increasingly play important roles. Recognition of different kinds of solutions and the tremendous potential of converts for facilitating integration through cross-cultural understanding may be one starting point.

INCLUSION IN CONCLUSION

It is my hope that the connections between these cultural brokers and the mission of the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (ICD) has become more clear. Syncretic solutions are not only evident in MeMi but also in the *Mua'chat* efforts of Ahmadiya Muslim communities to deliberately pair their German Muslim converts with more experienced worshipers. While Cultural Theory offers a framework to understand why these practices are successful, these best practices can contribute to

social cohesion and peacebuilding while alleviating bilateral tensions between Turkey and Germany on many levels. Coverts and volunteer cultural brokers can reconcile conflict in societies through intercultural dialogue. In the case of MeMi it is possible to foster dialogue and religious understanding without necessarily subscribing to the religious views of the “other”.

In reviewing the discussion on integration and assimilation it seems these discourses can still be relevant but need to be more inclusive and pluralized. Each is necessary, but not sufficient in isolation for understanding the plurality of competing contemporary policy stories between Germans and Muslim immigrants.

German converts and immigrants who clearly identify themselves as both Muslim and German provide living evidence of the reality of multiple identities which are increasingly becoming the norm for a new generation of cosmopolitan and transnational young people. Now more than ever there is a potential for open people to actively participate in everyday peacebuilding efforts as “cultural brokers” in various social contexts. Approaches that incorporate multiple perspectives and flexibility have the greatest chances of success. This was especially evident among converts who were adept at alternation between their multiple identities.

Building on the paradigms above, German Muslim converts can greatly facilitate integration by playing the role of cultural brokers, and in their leadership positions across a broad range of Muslim immigrant organizations and institutions. German converts also seem ideally positioned as mediators between the various branches of Islam, coordinating and leading the activities of umbrella organizations throughout the country. Converts will likely continue to play an increasingly important role as spokespersons for a variety of Islamic organizations, but this role need not be limited to converts to minority religions.

As suspected, there are viable alternatives to the elegant approaches dominant in current immigration and integration policies. Although this study focused on the German context, most of

the principles are applicable in neighboring countries and throughout the EU and Western world.

Some ideas and approaches among the minority groups differ substantially from those evident in the majority society. Incorporating policies that are deliberately more inclusive can work toward syncretic solutions which will likely show a more successful, sustainable way to move forward.

Finally, reflecting on emerging international patterns, it appears that tensions will likely continue in the future as many policy areas are in need of more inclusive reform. Ultimately, many Muslims in general and converts in particular are eager to be part of the solution. The outcomes from my exploratory study suggest the need for more inclusion and a broader, more differentiated understanding of heterogeneous Muslim communities, within which converts can be pivotal social actors with a critical role. Recognition of their potential can be a starting point for future inquiry. Taking time to understand the perspective and stories of others can allow vicarious learning to take place. “When the members of the dominant society begin to realize what the world looks like from the eyes of the minority – ‘looking through (symbolic) immigrant eyes’ – then the grand project of integration can truly succeed” (Beck-Gernsheim, 2009).

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