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Religion in Austria is peer-reviewed

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Religion in Austria

Volume 2



PRAESENS VERLAG

Published with support from the
Kulturabteilung der Stadt Wien, Forschungs- und
Wissenschaftsförderung



and the Research Platform *Religion and Transfor-
mation in Contemporary European Society*



Layout

Julia Peitl

Cover art

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**Bibliographic information published by the
Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>

ISBN 978-3-7069-0836-8

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<http://www.praesens.at>

Vienna 2014

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Book Reviews

Muslime in Österreich: Geschichte, Lebenswelt, Religion. Grundlagen für den Dialog.

by Susanne Heine, Rüdiger Lohlker, and Richard Potz.
Innsbruck and Wien: Tyrolia, 2012. Pp. 294. ISBN: 978-3-7022-3025-8. €27.95

Levent Tezcan

Islam has become a controversial and hotly debated topic in Europe. Historical confrontations between Christians and Muslims may certainly have burdened current Christian-Muslim relations, but history alone cannot explain today's tensions. The violent and fanatical practices of worldwide Islamic movements may also play a role. However, these practices are a matter of foreign policy. Another aspect of Christian-Muslim relations needs to be taken into account in order to understand the current state of interactions between Muslims and the populations of Europe where they live. Islam in Europe is currently a religion of migrants. Muslims arrived in Europe under different political-historical guises after World War II—be it as guest workers or immigrants from former colonies. The overall position of Muslims in Europe is fatefully entangled with their migrant status. This condition affects not only the type of religiosity and the content of the religious issues that Muslims in Europe prioritise, but also the way in which Islam and Muslims are perceived by the wider society. Only Bosnia is an exception, with its numerically significant Muslim population that boasts a long history of residence on European soil. It is unsurprising, therefore, that historical connections with Bosnia differentiate Austria from other European countries with regards to migrants' Islam.

Muslime in Österreich: Geschichte, Lebenswelt, Religion (Muslims in Austria: History, Life, Religion), a co-authored work by a Protestant theologian (Susanne Heine), an Islamic studies scholar (Rüdiger Lohlker), and a legal scholar (Richard Potz), brings the historical and present-day manifestations of Islam in Austria together. Through the subtitle *Grundlagen für*

den Dialog (Essentials for Dialogue), the authors express their normative agenda from the offset. In order to engender a successful dialogue one needs (a) knowledge of the historical background of relationships as well as institutional arrangements already in place (b) to know through which organisations Islamic life is carried out and by which organisations it is represented, and (c) to determine which topics shape Islamic life in a given context. Finally, (d) theological knowledge must be provided as a prerequisite to religious talks in order to avoid misunderstandings and to discover commonalities. It is no exaggeration to suggest that, given the richness of topics it covers, this compendium may be regarded as a handbook or reference book on the Muslim presence in Austria.

The book contains 14 chapters. After providing some statistical data at the start, two hot topics of debate regarding Islam in Europe, namely ‘parallel societies’ (‘parallel lives’ in the British debate) and ‘Islamophobia’ are briefly discussed. The authors convey mild astonishment, in a slightly polemical fashion, that these terms when applied to Muslims lack the positive connotations which familiar concepts such as ‘alternative society’ or ‘counter society’ once enjoyed. A general climate of negative sentiments, culminating in Islamophobia, fuels suspicion when Muslims are regarded as objects of interest. According to the authors, the allegation of ‘parallel societies’ hampers the acknowledgement of the potential contributions that Muslim organisations can make to an ‘overlapping consensus’ (p. 25). Regarding the allusion to the much more favourably regarded concept of ‘counter society’, however, one might posit the question of whether this comparison really fits. Is it not at least theoretically possible that both types of ‘parallel societies’ could indeed be very different in nature? This possibility is not taken into consideration for conceptual reasons (namely a general affirmative stance towards Muslim groups) which shall be elaborated upon below.

The historical background is dealt with chiefly in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, which present a particular feature of the Austrian regime of dealing with Islam. After the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 the Habsburg Monarchy issued the Islam Law (*Islamgesetz*, 1912) which, despite the dramatic changes in Austria’s political system during the 20th century, has survived to the present day. This law, still the only law in a non-Muslim country to regulate Islamic affairs on a high legal level, recognises Islam as a religion by intentionally giving it a certain institutional shape. We have to acknowledge that the *Islamgesetz* anticipated at a very early stage the necessary institutional adaptations that Islam as an immigrant religion is currently undergoing across most of Europe.

Islam, however, is an abstract term; it needs to be addressed concretely. In order to do so the authors draw attention to the carriers, i.e. religious movements, groups, and organisations. These are—more so than other topics in the book—described in a general way without going into specific details. Although in principle this is compatible with the aim of the book to give an overview of Muslims' lives rather than specific case studies, a more differentiated picture would have better fit the reality of these organisations. Can the asserted contribution of such groups to 'overlapping consensus' and to 'integration' be detected simply through an examination of the general positive statements that they make regarding democracy or their commitment to Austria as their new homeland? My point is analytically motivated: should we not rather look for the culture the specific groups nurture? Congregations are, in the final assessment, workshops where certain character types are trained and others avoided (in sociological terms: the conduct of life). A statement in favour of the contributions of these organisations must examine cultural visions as well as social conditions within these groups. By this I do not simply have in mind the support for the separation of sexes during physical education (Ch. 7.3), which is obviously the rule in Austrian schools. It is rather the everyday relationships between sexes within these Islamic milieus that will provide essential insights into the constitution of subjects in these contexts.

Knowledge of the culture nurtured within communities is of crucial importance since Islam is becoming part of Austrian society in which, despite everyday problems and anti-Islamic resentments, as described in the following chapters, a political will exists of considerable merit. Provisions for Islamic education and prayer training at schools in Austria have advanced far. Together with the construction of mosques and cemeteries, such regulations lend a localised form to Islam. Various topics, from Islamic holidays, marriage, media, music, and Islamic finance to highly dramatic issues such as 'honour killings' and female genital mutilation, are touched upon in a brief but informative manner (Ch. 7-11), followed by chapters which are practically a second part of the book. Chapters 12 to 14 deal strictly with theological matters and can also be read separately (not only due to their length of approximately 100 pages).

The underlying assumption of this part of the book seems to be that dialogue, taken by the authors to be the very basis of social peace, is only possible if theological differences can be made compatible. Thus, differences between Islam and Christianity are discussed in a manner that highlights ways in which, in most cases, they *can* be reconciled or *must* be defused. Radical difference in theological matters would cause the most distance between Muslims and Christians, with enormous negative social conse-

quences. This might be the reason for the strong emphasis authors put on the monotheism of Christianity, which given the dogma of the trinity was mostly not honoured or often misunderstood by Muslims. Such attempts lead, though, to statements of a very general nature which are taken in the book as evidence of commonalities between both religions: ‘everything comes from God and everything must return to him’ (p. 229).

Even in matters of theodicy (*forgiveness and redemption*, p. 208), which is more closely connected to practical social action, the differences between Islam and Christianity seem, according to the authors, compatible despite their differences. Max Weber built his whole sociology of religion upon the analysis of different concepts of salvation that so-called ‘world religions’ developed. From a common doctrinal idea such as radical monotheism, which Calvinism and Islam share, different cultural effects can arise because the theodicy problem is approached differently by these religious traditions. We should avoid falling below the analytical level which social sciences have achieved thanks to Weber. The reader is left with the impression that the normative commitment of the authors does not always support the pursuit of knowledge. To proffer an example from the book (p. 204) which concerns the assumed capability of both religions to address environmental issues: contrary to the assumptions of the authors, the general religious command to save God’s creation in Islam and Christianity does not, as the theological statement would lead us to believe, automatically engender an engagement in environmental protection. From a sociological point of view the question that must rather be posed is how far environmentally engaged politics is *actually* related to Christianity or Islam. Where, in reality, do Muslims and Christians pursue environmentally engaged politics with religious motives? The answer is unfortunately not encouraging. Interestingly, pressure for environmental protection has rarely originated from organised milieus of Christians or Muslims. Real existing practices, not the hypothetical assumptions theologically legitimated by both religions, should be given priority when one reflects upon the practical relevance of religious concepts.

What I wish to underscore through this review concerns the question of how far normative goals can threaten to interfere with analytical work. Studies on Islam have to reflect upon this problem more so than any other branch of research because the danger of a conflation between normativity and analytical work is more probably due to the present Islamophobia that Muslim migrants face today in Europe.

In sum, in ‘Muslime in Österreich’ students of different aspects of Muslim life in Austria and those interested in interfaith dialogue may find a handbook which delivers a good starting point to support further study.