Religion Matters Faith and its Practice Influence Coexistence More Than Generally Assumed

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Summary: Two WZB surveys questioned Muslims and non-Muslims about their attitudes toward the other group and religious symbols. It was shown that most people make clear distinctions between Muslims as a group and religious practices such as wearing a headscarf. These distinctions can partly be explained by the respondents' values, religiosity, gender and attitudes towards gender differences. The state-church relationship also plays a major role.

These days, when someone in Western Europe speaks about 'migrants' they usually mean immigrants from Muslim countries who make up most of the immigrant population in most West European countries. In the past two decades, the most heated debates regarding immigrants and their integration have been about Muslim religious practices, such as wearing a headscarf, or about houses of worship like mosques, and especially minarets. Now secular societies of Western Europe are finding themselves confronted by completely new challenges: Which religious practices can be tolerated and how can liberal values be maintained?

Given the urgency of this matter, it is surprising how little is known about Western European attitudes with regard to these challenges, and which religious rights Muslims themselves consider important. Most studies have focused on political discussions about Islam and Muslim integration. Despite the numerous surveys about migration, attitudes towards Muslim migrants and their religious practices have hardly been explored.

To close this research gap, the WZB's Migration and Diversity research area recently conducted two surveys on native and Muslim immigrant attitudes about immigration and integration in Western Europe:

The EURISLAM Telephone Survey questioned some 7,000 people with and without immigrant background in six countries – Belgium, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Switzerland. The respondents with immigrant background had Muslim roots in ex-Yugoslavia, Morocco, Turkey and Pakistan. International comparisons were made about the attitudes of Muslims and non-Muslims regarding religious symbols such as a Christian nun's habit and Muslim headscarves, as well as religious education.

The "Six Country Immigrant Integration Comparative Survey (SCIICS)" compared the attitudes of 500 natives of Belgium, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria and Sweden (3,000 altogether) toward Muslims in general, and toward headscarves in school in particular.

The study sought to discover to what extent a difference is made between the group as such and its religious practices.

Most attitudes to Muslims were fairly tolerant. However, most respondents rejected schoolgirls wearing headscarves. The second stage of the study investigated this difference and revealed that attitudes regarding Muslims and the headscarf have to do with the respondents' liberal values and religiosity.

People with liberal values were found to be more positive toward Muslims than people with conservative values, which corroborates numerous studies showing that liberal values make for greater openness towards immigrants. However, whether people with liberal values are actually tolerant of alien cultures or only of those things that do not conflict with their liberal values is hotly debated. Some people view religion itself as conflicting with a liberal state; even more view the Muslim headscarf as a sign of a woman's oppression. The study also revealed that people with liberal values tend to be skeptical of the headscarf.

Our analysis also shows that the evaluation of religious symbols is linked to attitudes regarding gender equality. Interestingly enough, non-Muslims who support gender equality are more likely to reject the headscarf but not the Christian nun's habit, while Muslims who support gender equality reject the habit but not the headscarf. Individuals clearly have different standards for their own group and another.

But the headscarf's significance is not clear: wearing a headscarf can be rejected in the name of gender equality – and that can be viewed as religious discrimination; wearing a headscarf can, however, also be legitimized in the name of gender equality – and that can be viewed as support for illiberal practices.

It is striking that it is predominantly men without immigrant background and not women – who would be directly affected by the oppression of women – who reject veiling. This finding complements current research that shows that men generally harbor more resentment towards Muslims than women.

However, it must also be emphasized that rejection of the headscarf should not be interpreted as rejection of Muslims per se. When comparing attitudes toward veiling with attitudes toward religious instruction, we see that non-Muslims and Muslims both support religious instruction more than veiling. It is principally the Muslim headscarf in public institutions that causes controversy – among Muslim immigrants, too. Analysis of this public debate shows that the headscarf is also of central significance for Muslims, more important than the issue of religious instruction.

Both studies show that religiosity plays a key role in attitudes towards Muslims: People who often go to church reject Muslims more than those who are not religious. This can partly be explained by the fact that churchgoers often have conservative values and therefore have generally negative attitudes towards immigrants. Interestingly, however, this negative effect disappears in terms of Muslim religious practices in particular. It can be assumed that churchgoers do not reject the religious practices of other communities and actually demonstrate greater solidarity with them. In secular societies, religious Christians see practicing Muslims more as allies and less as threats.

However, Muslim immigrants, who tend to be more religious than the Christian receiving society, are more tolerant about rights for their own group as well as rights for Christians, while non-Muslims clearly accord more importance to Christian rights but apparently prefer that immigrants assimilate. The generally more religious ethnic groups, such as Moroccan and Pakistani Muslims, prove to be more tolerant in this respect, a finding that has important implications for integration.

The significance of religion with regard to Muslim immigration also becomes clear when we compare countries: The church's role in a society influences how its citizens treat religious minorities. The stronger the connection between State and Church, the more tolerant its citizens are toward headscarves. In a country like Sweden, that had an official religion until the year 2000, only a minority of citizens reject the headscarf. But in lay France, where the State was clearly separated from the Church in 1905, the headscarf is overwhelmingly rejected.

Our data shows that this difference in attitudes is found not only among natives of the receiving society, but also among its immigrants. Muslims in France are more negative regarding headscarves than in other countries. When it comes to attitudes towards religious instruction in France, however, very clear differences of opinion are found between Muslims and non-Muslims – noticeably larger than in other countries. This does not result from particularly strong approval of religious instruction by Muslims in France, but rather the majority society's vehement rejection of it.

These two studies reveal a number of important explanatory factors. The comparative approach has also made it possible to study differences among coun-

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tries with regard to attitudes towards Muslims and their religious practices. This makes an important contribution regarding attitudes toward one of the most important immigrant groups in Western Europe.

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