Religion and Interreligious dialogue:
The role of religion in German and African societies

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Dear Reader,

Although there is an observable trend of secularization and de-attachment from religious institutions in some parts of the world, especially in European countries, religion remains an important part of social identification in all societies. As Annira Busch explains, even in a secular country like Germany where about one third of the population considers itself as non-religious, there has been a noticeable resurgence of religion in the public and political debate in the last couple of years which is closely linked to the increasing importance of Islam in Germany. Reflecting on the role of religion in Nigeria, Salaudeen Abdulrahman points to the potentials of interreligious cooperation as a means to positively exploit religious differences. How religious elites can contribute both to the escalation and de-escalation of conflicts is explained by Johannes Vüllers in our expert interview. Last but not least, Go Africa Go Germany generation 4 alumnus Gys Hough is featured in this issue.

Best,
Your JointMAG Team

Alex Schwartz, Julian Beegmann & Linda Poppe
Editors

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JM 21 - CITIZENS AND DECISION MAKING

In Issue 21 we would like to look at direct participation of citizens in decision making through referenda and other means. Why do we have direct participation, how is it organized and what does it lead to? If you would like to write about a specific case or contribute to the general theoretical discussion, please contact us by June 30th.
“…without certain diversity all cooperation would be impossible” E. Durkheim

The world population is drawn along various social strata and social identifications with religious attachments being one of the most pervasive. Especially in Africa, the vast majority of the population is affiliated to various religions such as African traditional religions and also the advent of Christianity and Islam. Religion remains a major aspect of our social identification as the diverse ethnicity in Africa is also uniquely linked to some religious attachments. While the Southern part of Africa is mostly dominated by Christianity and the Northern part by the Islamic religion, the East African, Central African and West African regions are characterized by a mixture of traditional religion, Islam and Christianity.

Religion has been part of the social fabric of many African societies where, for instance, many national anthems and pledges acknowledge or take solace in God in achieving their national ideals. For instance, the Nigerian national pledge ends with “…So help me God”. Another example is that many Africans still bear Islamic, traditional or Christians as either surnames, middle names or first names, which depicts religion as a major social identity.

In Nigeria, there is a spectacular mix of religions: While there is a predominantly Muslim population in the Northeast and West of Nigeria and the north-central part observes a mix of Muslim and predominantly Christian population, the South-East and South-South are characterized by a predominantly Christian population while the South-West has a mix of Muslim and Christian population. This religious diversity in Nigeria also has an influence on the daily lifestyles and customs of the respective areas. The predominantly Muslim areas for example have dress patterns that depict their adherence to the Islamic faith and, interestingly enough, Arabic language is being used by both Christian and Muslim population in daily use. Words like Allah, which stands for God, are both used in churches and mosques in the North, while in the Southwest many families have a mixture of many faith adherents in a lineage.

In contemporary times, there have been cases of religious discrimination in affairs of general benefit, such as admission to schools being offered on the basis of religious affiliation leading to various religious societies establishing their schools to satisfy their need for education. Furthermore, in single cases jobs are being offered based on religious affiliation.

All these incitements of discrimination have also led to nepotism where those who do not deserve certain benefits enjoy them and this has resulted in corruption of resources by people who claim to be "religious", even if their religions have actually called them to be just and eschew acts of corruption as pointed in the holy books.

All these societal strains have culminated into a mindset of 'We against Them' among the followers of Islam and Christianity, coupled with the international events, where there have been clashes of faith in many areas of the world, which has led to rampant uninformed labeling and stereotypes against each other.

In reality, Nigerians are becoming pseudo-religious as symbolism ranks higher than pragmatism if they do not take their standards of religion from their religion. Hero-worship, bigotry and intolerance are also becoming pervasive amongst the followers of the religions.
In a bid to curb this dangerous trend, the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) was established in 1999. The council comprises Muslim and Christian clerics who are expected to work towards Inter-Religious harmony and tolerance amongst the popular adherents of Islam and Christian followers in the country and are expected to achieve religious harmony through proper understanding of the teachings of their respective religion.

The NIREC has provided recommendations on inter-religious cooperation to various levels of government, an example being the recommendation offered by the youth summit of the council in 2009 in the wake of the Jos crises which includes two major points:

1. Pursuance of knowledge by the youths is considered desirable in order to leave a purposeful and dignified life devoid of intolerance and discord, with a view to contributing their quota to nation building. This should be encouraged by all governments.
2. Religious rights of individuals must be protected and guaranteed based on genuine dictates and requirements of their respective faiths. Hence fairness and justice must be ensured by our governments.

As good as the objectives of the council are, there is more that can be pragmatically done by making their presence felt in many areas of the country, by establishing local worship centres in various strategic areas of the country to engage in developmental projects (like anti-malaria campaign, environmental sanitation campaign, civic education programmes). This will make the followers see that they can achieve better results by engaging in projects that will ensure their mutual preservation of existence. It will also make the followers of the respective religion learn more about their differences in their faiths, so that it cannot be exploited by those who want to incite on religious differences to cause chaos.

In a very volatile climate, there is need for a precise intelligence among religions, so that the real friends can be identified, religious intolerance streamlined and mutual respect and understanding achieved. This will remain an utopia except we positively exploit our differences.

Salaudeen Abdulrahman Adeshina

Salaudeen Abdulrahman Adeshina is alumnus of the 3rd Generation of the Go Africa… Go Germany Programme and resides in Lagos, Nigeria.
Religiosity in Germany – a non-religious society?

On last year’s German national holiday, the third of October, Federal President Christian Wulff stated that “Islam is part of Germany”. This was the trigger for a discussion which has erupted ever since Turkey has applied for EU membership in 1987. The amount of people vehemently disagreeing with Wulff clearly shows that many do not accept Islam as a part of the German culture.

There are two important questions involved in this debate. Firstly, why is it that religion suddenly gets so much attention in a country where about one third of the population considers itself non-religious? Secondly, why is Islam opposed as a moral institution? Along with most other European countries, modern Germany is a secular country. The term “secularism” derives from the Latin word saeculum, meaning worldly realm. Refocusing on incidents in human life in the here and now rather than afterlife, secularism arose in Europe as an emancipatory movement from the ideological and institutional shackles of the Church. It was brought about by enlightenment and humanism which focused on human reasonability.

The principle of secularism is implemented in the European law systems in different ways. In Germany, the so called “separation law” (Trennungsgesetz) dating from 1919 regulates the relationship between the church and the state. The German separation law envisages a special system of secularism, as it allows for a cooperative partnership between the Church and the state. While the freedom of religion is rooted in the German constitution, the German state is therefore not a purely laical state like for example France where religious institutions are autonomous. Under the concept of “positive neutrality”, the German state shares certain aspects of social life with the church. The German state is for example responsible for raising the church tax (ca. 4.4 billion Euro in 2009) and supervises religious education in schools.

Proponents of the cooperative relationship between church and state say that it recognizes religion as a constitutive part of society, while enabling the state to equally guarantee liberty to all religious and non-religious entities of society. However, this principle becomes critical if it gives privilege to certain religious communities. In Germany, this is clearly the case. While Christian and also Jewish communities enjoy special rights, Islam is not on equal legal terms. It is not officially considered a religious community which enables it to raise taxes, get special tax concessions and labor laws for affiliated organizations such as “Caritas” (Catholic Church) and “Diakonisches Werk” (Protestant Church).

According to numbers by REMID, about 25 million Germans are Catholics and 24.1 million Protestants. Islam is the second largest religion after Christianity, about four million Muslims, mainly from Turkey, live in Germany. The rest belongs either to other denominations or to the dominant group of about 34.1 percent Germans who do not have a religion.

The Christian churches in Germany are faced with a steady loss of members. There are several reasons for this phenomenon, with an important one being that the Churches still do not seem to be able to bridge the gap between what they claim faith to be in theory and the everyday life of the great majority of the population. To give an example, the Catholic Church has long refrained from acknowledging the secular state and only formally acknowledged it in the Second Vatican Council in 1964. A study of the Bertelsmann Foundation in 2007 has revealed that the number of people who believe in some form of transcendence is ten percent higher (about 70 percent) than the number of Germans who are members of the Christian churches. Membership in the churches is today rather a model of choice than a model of


2 http://www.remid.de/remid_info_zahlen.htm

obligation or duty. Therefore, many Germans do not necessarily connect faith with a certain religion and rather treat it as a private matter.

Despite a growing number of secessions from the Church and what seems to become an increasingly non-religious society, there has been a noticeable resurgence of religion in the public and political debate during the last couple of years. Grace Davie attributes this to the growing presence of groups from other countries, namely Muslim dominated ones, in Europe which challenge some deeply held European assumptions. “It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the public debate about religion in Europe is disproportionately related to the presence of Muslims in most European societies.”

This discourse turns around the statement that Muslim values are not compatible with European ones. Europe is said to be threatened by Islam in its values and cultural heritage. In the course of defining European values, Christian-Jewish values are referred to that have long believed to be overcome by secularism.

This is surprising in the aspect that Jan Cremer rightly points out to: Values that are conceived to be European like human rights, liberalism and democracy were actually brought about by enlightenment and the struggle for secularism which fought against the leading dogma of the Catholic Church. Scholars have also argued that our moral system has well worked without everybody being religious. It is therefore highly doubtful that European values are solely based on Christian-Jewish heritage.

The uprisings in the Muslim dominated world against its authoritarian leaders have once more shown that the wish for basic human rights and political self-determination are shared by all human beings and cannot solely be claimed by the West. Still, Islam is opposed as a moral institution in Germany. This phenomenon can mainly be attributed to a fear of the unknown. There is little knowledge about the core values of Islam and the Muslim world in general. On top of that, German media focuses on the portrayal of radical Islamist groups. Islamism is worrying, but remains a side effect of a pluralistic society.

In order to calm down a heated discussion and to better regulate radical movements, the German state should take action. In order to acknowledge the role that Islam plays in Germany today, it is in dire need to establish a constructive dialogue with Muslim representatives. First attempts have been made. There is the German Islam Conference which brings together representatives of the state and various Muslim organizations. Starting in fall this year, a program for the training of imams will be launched by the German universities Münster/Osnabrück and Tübingen. Nevertheless, more efforts are required if Germany wants to stay a tolerant and inclusive, but secular country.

Annira Busch

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5 Cremer, Jan (2006): Die Türkei und die europäische Identität, 17.07.2006, http://www.bpb.de/themen/44C1DD.0.0.Die_T%C3%BCrkei_und_die_ europ%E4ische_ Identit%64.html.
Julian Bergmann: It seems to be common knowledge that religious differences between communities are a main reason for violent conflict in many countries. Relating to African countries, one could refer for example to the violent conflict between Christians and Muslims in some parts of Nigeria or to religious clashes in Côte d’Ivoire to support this assumption. From a scholarly standpoint, would you support this general assumption about religion being a main cause of violent conflict?

Johannes Vüllers: No, the assumption that religious differences lead to violent conflict needs to be qualified. Conflict boundaries often run parallel to religious boundaries, for example in Nigeria, Sudan or Côte d’Ivoire. In cases with such a conflict structure, however, the impact of religion on the conflict differs widely: from a clear religious connotation and influence to an absence of any direct influence of religion. In Nigeria, for example, the introduction of the Shari’a in some Northern regions is not a sufficient explanation for the violence. In fact, land conflicts and other socioeconomic causes are relevant too. Another example is Côte d’Ivoire, where the religious differences were highlighted during the violence after the 2000 elections. Nonetheless, the civil war which started in 2002 was not linked directly to the different religious identities. The conflict cause was foremost an exclusive concept about national citizenship, which had a primarily ethnic – not religious – connotation.

These two examples show that religion is not necessarily the major conflict cause, even in countries where religious differences are in place. In most cases, violent conflicts are multifaceted, and religion is one among many possible causes of war. Nonetheless, religious fundamentalists can act on their religious believes. However, these cases are empirically the exception and are more likely occur as riots and not to escalate into civil wars.

Julian Bergmann: If religion is not necessarily the main conflict cause, are there other ways by which religion has an impact on conflicts and are there important differences regarding the character and intensity of the religious dimension of these conflicts?

Johannes Vüllers: The impact of religion on conflict has several dimensions. I will concentrate here on “religious incompatibility” to show the difficulty in identifying the impact of religion. The major task is, however, to verify if the incompatibility is “religious” or if another cause lies behind it - for example, the instrumentalisation of religion by political elites. At the end of the day, we will never know whether an actor acts because of his believes or uses his religion for other purposes, for example to mobilize his followers. But we can employ suitable methods to approach an explanation as accurate as possible.

Empirically, most of the violent conflicts entailing a
religious incompatibility are conflicts over the introduction of the Shari’a in sub-Saharan Africa. This religious dimension makes conflict management and resolution particularly difficult. Nonetheless, the peace agreement in Sudan has exemplified that it is possible.

JM: In your work, you also focus on religious elites’ engagement for peace. By what means can religious actors contribute to peace processes? Could you give us an example of successful religious peace activism in African countries?

JV: Religious elites can contribute to peace in two ways. First, they can support or build a peace initiative with the organizational resources of their religious communities. Thanks to their extensive networks, they can gain financial or logistical support for their peace initiatives and they can reach a wide audience with their calls for peace. Second, the religious elites are important in convincing their believers to support peace. In all religions, norms can and must be interpreted, and are therefore possible sources to legitimize specific behavior, such as peace activism. In the eyes of believers, the religious elites have the religious authority and necessary knowledge to call for actions like peace initiatives. For these reasons, in my opinion they are the most relevant actors.

We need to distinguish between simple calls for peace and more extensive peace activism. In almost every sub-Saharan African country we found calls for peace by religious elites – both Christians and Muslims. These calls are important to appease their own religious communities, but their empirical effectiveness is hard to measure. Beside these individual calls, in several countries religious communities have been engaging for peace in a more institutionalised manner and over several years. Just to name two examples, the New Sudanese Council of Churches was the driving force behind the People-to-People Peace Process in the South-Sudan civil war in the 1990s, and the Forum des Confessions Religieuses Côte d’Ivoire has been contributing to the inter-religious understanding in Côte d’Ivoire since 1998.

JM: From your perspective, in what circumstances do religious elites engage for peace and what are the conditions of successful religious peace activism?

JV: First and foremost, religious actors must act in conformity with their own religious norms to be credible. Furthermore, their behavior has to be in line with the religious values of the religious communities to convince their believers to follow them. I would say these two conditions are particularly important for longer-term peace activism due to the situation of insecurity in times of civil war. However, the religious actors must take into account a high personal risk, such as becoming a target of the civil war parties. It is hard to identify the conditions for successful peace activism because of the complexity of such processes. Fundamentally, it can be stated that the religious communities should act in unison and that secular actors too have to support peace activism on the political as well as societal level.

JM: What questions regarding the religion-conflict/peace-nexus have not been answered so far by scholars and experts? What questions or issues will you personally focus on in your future research?

JV: The causal explanation of escalation and de-escalation processes with regard to religion needs more micro-foundation, in theory and in practice. Another theoretical gap, so far, is the lack of explanations for peace engagement of religious actors. Finally, the effectiveness of the behavior of religious actors towards peace and violence is understudied. The knowledge of these aspects will enable the research community to make better founded policy recommendations to prevent or to de-escalate religious conflicts.

JM: Thank you very much for this interview!
Mwenda Gatobu Manyara:
As a member of the Fourth Generation of the large Go Africa...Go Germany network, kindly describe yourself to the members who do not know you.

Gys Hough: I have a BA degree in Policy and Value Studies and a Masters in Political Management from the University of Stellenbosch. After my studies, I was affiliated with the same university as a researcher at the Centre for Chinese Studies (CCS). The CCS is a think tank that focuses on Chinese involvement in Africa. In this time, I got accepted to the “Go Africa…Go Germany” programme. The programme has afforded me with the opportunity to do research for the German Federation of Industries on Rare Earth Minerals and to hopefully join the GIZ in South Africa.

MGM: How can you describe the Go Africa...Go Germany Programme in general? Did you get any new perspectives about your home country and Germany after the trip?

GH: As all of the Alumni know, the combination of a diverse group, interesting field trips, thought provoking lectures and a busy schedule make for a very exciting experience. This experience is hugely advantageous, because it educates, but also serves as a platform for international friendships on which the German-African partnership can be further developed.

During the trip to South Africa I was struck by the richness of South Africa’s history and the political miracle of 1994. What was most informative was to see my home country through the eyes of my German friends. The question of racial integration between school goers and university students came up a lot, but I assured my friends that it was more a function of difference in a shared background than an in-group out-group distinction.

Germany was an eye opener of note. One reads and tries to understand but nothing can replace the first-hand experience of travelling to Germany with knowledgeable participants. From the view of someone who is interested in policy making the way in which Germany addresses the issues surrounding reunification, migration, national identity and an aging population was really interesting.

MGM: What impressions do you have from the field trip to Swaziland?

GH: Swaziland’s existence as the world’s only dual-monarch system is due to a very interesting colonial history. It struck me that being ruled by King Mswati must form an integral part of Swazi identity. This is probably why the Swazi have not been able to effectively organize against King Mswati. The country suffers from a 50% HIV rate, recently a budget crisis has been announced even though Mswati’s 13 wives travel the world in luxury. All this while literally being surrounded by a country that is reaping the benefits of democracy points to a social dynamic that does more to explain his rule than an overly effective state security system.

After my visit to Swaziland, I have also started theorizing that a country’s HIV prevalence is strongly correlated with male values and behaviour towards women. Due to the King’s example women are seen as collectable sexual items - a value that does not go well with not having multiple concurrent partners and HIV prevention.
MGM: As an expert on Chinese policy towards Africa, what do you think is the impact of China’s ever increasing influence in Africa? In your opinion, what do you think are its implications for the European Union and the USA?

GH: Until quite recently China was also an aid receiving country. This experience has made it easier for China to engage with African countries on an equal footing within the economic development sector. A host of African leaders have expressed an appreciation for the policy autonomy that developmental assistance from China provides them in terms of relations with the EU and the US.

The added option of engaging with China instead of the EU and US obviously forces the EU and US to create more demand driven development packages that aren’t characterized by a host of economic and political conditions. Some EU international relations professionals have alluded to it that competition with China calls for a country to discard its values. To my mind strong EU and US relations in Africa definitely still exist and beneficial engagement is based on speaking open and frankly to achieve a win-win situation rather than compromising one’s values.

Whether African leaders will be able to use this new found autonomy to convert the comparative advantage of agricultural land and minerals into more sustainable and diverse economic drivers remains to be seen but to my view options and leverage at the negotiation table puts African countries in good stead.

MGM: What is your parting shot?

GH: At present there are talks to create the Go Africa Go Germany Foundation. As I understand, it the status of Foundation will make it possible for the Alumni to apply directly for funds for civic education purposes in Africa. This allows us to use our own initiative to make a difference in terms of political participation and development. This is a precious opportunity seeing that every NGO dreams of stable and predictable funding and technical support but the realization of it hinges on our initiative and enthusiasm. So as Alumni, see if you can make it to Bonn in July and bring your best ideas along. In this way and by staying in contact we can sustain the momentum that was generated during the previous trips to Africa.
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