The complete study is only available in German:
Weltanschauliche Vielfalt und Demokratie
Wie sich religiöse Pluralität auf die politische Kultur auswirkt
Bertelsmann Stiftung (Hrsg.)

Executive Summary

Religious Diversity and Democracy

Gert Pickel

Bertelsmann**Stiftung**

Summary

What significance does religious pluralization have for the political culture in Germany and other selected countries in Europe? Gert Pickel, a sociologist of religion at the University of Leipzig, explored this question based on data from the Bertelsmann Stiftung's 2017 Religion Monitor. This empirical study is based on representative surveys in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France, the United Kingdom, and Turkey. The core findings of these analyses are summarized below.

Fundamental democratic principles enjoy a high degree of legitimacy among members of the various religions. Independent of religious affiliation, democracy is widely accepted in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, the United Kingdom, and Turkey. At least four out of five respondents in each of these countries regard democracy as a good form of government; in Germany, 89 percent hold this view. A broad consensus among Christians, Muslims, and the nonreligious is discernible. Approximately 80 percent of respondents in Germany also uphold the protection of minorities as a basic principle of liberal democracy. Muslims, themselves a religious minority in most of the countries studied, attach greater importance to safeguarding the interests of minorities than do Christians or people with no religious affiliation.

Individuals who belong to a religion more often express the desire for strong leadership in politics. In empirical surveys, the question of the attractiveness of strong political leaders is used to learn more about patterns of skepticism toward democracy, because these touch on core principles of democratic codetermination and participation.

In Germany, more than half of respondents want a person who governs Germany with a firm hand. This proportion is higher among Christians and Muslims (up to two thirds) than among respondents with no religious affiliation (49 percent). Furthermore, about one quarter of Catholics and Protestants and 37 percent of Sunni Muslims in Germany consider it desirable for religious leaders to have greater political influence. Among less observant Alevi and Shiite Muslims and among the religiously unaffiliated, fewer than 20 percent express this desire.

Respondents' evaluation of democracy in the various countries is determined by their perception of how it is practiced, rather than by their religious affiliation. Whereas 89 percent of respondents in Switzerland are largely satisfied with the implementation of democracy in their country, less than two thirds (57 percent) of the population in France hold this view. In Germany, 72 percent of those surveyed say that democracy is working well there. While the British are relatively satisfied with democracy (75 percent), many of them express a pronounced distrust of politicians; four out of five Britons do not trust politicians at all—a view held equally by members of the various religions. Christians, Muslims, and the religiously unaffiliated in Switzerland and in Germany express the greatest trust in politicians. The results make clear that the evaluation of democracy and politics strongly depends on country-specific factors; the situation in each country is uniformly evaluated as negative or positive by members of the various religions and the religiously unaffiliated there. Greater discrepancies are found especially in Austria: The Muslims living

there are less satisfied with politics and with politicians than the average.

It is not religion per se, but dogmatic attitudes that are problematic for democracies. The results of the study showed that members of any religion can be good democrats. For most religious individuals, a life lived according to their religious precepts is readily compatible with fundamental democratic principles. However, people who express dogmatic or rigid religious beliefs and think that there is only one true religion are more likely to question the legitimacy of democracies. In Germany these exclusivist attitudes are most widespread among Sunni Muslims, although even here only a minority (32 percent) hold this opinion. The corresponding figure is 20 percent among Shiite Muslims, 13 percent among Catholics and 11 percent among Protestants. However, the connection between an exclusive understanding of truth and democratic legitimacy can be found not only among members of religions, but also among the nonreligious. In that case, it is not a religious creed that is associated with problematic views, but rather the rejection of the idea that an element of truth lies at the core of every religion. A significant number (51 percent) of nonreligious individuals take this view. Insufficient openness to (other) religions, a lack of tolerance, and dogmatic attitudes are thus problematic for democracies—regardless of whether these are expressed by Christians, Muslims or the religiously unaffiliated.

Values are strongly influenced by the social environment and not by religion alone. The various religions certainly uphold different values, as illustrated, for example, by gender roles. Thus, half of the Muslim respondents in Germany support the traditional role of women being primarily active in the household and family. Among Catholics and Protestants, 35 percent hold this view, while among the nonreligious, this figure is merely 18 percent. However, the more traditional attitudes of Muslims are not solely attributable to their religion; rather, they also reflect social influences during their upbringing. Whereas Muslims born and raised in Germany are approaching the national average in terms of gender roles, Muslims socialized in other countries more often express traditional views

of women. Similar differences can be observed in regard to attitudes about same-sex marriage: Whereas eight out of ten Christians and nine out of ten nonreligious people approve of same-sex marriage, among Muslims this ratio is six out of ten. Here too, the results show that acceptance of same-sex marriage is significantly lower among immigrant Muslims than among those born in Germany. Acceptance is particularly low in Turkey, where only one in five respondents approve of same-sex marriage.

In France and the United Kingdom, religious tolerance is declining. In Germany, a majority of the population (87 percent) remains open to all religions. This level has remained stable since 2013. Likewise, in the other countries of western Europe at least 80 percent of respondents think that people should basically be open to all religions. This does not always include openness to the veracity of religious tenets and beliefs. Nevertheless, about three out of four respondents in Germany, Austria and Switzerland express this opinion and are thus considered tolerant. (In previous studies, France = 73 percent; UK = 80 percent.)

Negative perceptions of Islam are taking root in Western Europe. A clear majority of respondents in Germany regard Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity as enriching. Only about one in ten categorize these religions as threatening. On the other hand, only 35 percent of respondents in western Germany and 24 percent in eastern Germany regard Islam as enriching for society. In Germany nationwide, one out of two respondents perceive Islam as a threat. Followed over time, it is clear that the overall population's perception of Islam as a threat, though relatively high, has remained steady since 2013. This is also the case for the other Western European countries surveyed: The proportion of those who view Islam as a threat ranges from around 40 percent (United Kingdom, France) to about 50 percent (Switzerland). Only in Turkey does the trend take a different direction. There, the perception of another religion as a threat has clearly increased since 2013 for Judaism (to 54 percent), Christianity (to 52 percent) and atheism (to 56 percent).

Whether another religion is perceived as a threat depends on an individual's own religion. The

degree of mutual mistrust among the religions varies. Thus, Islam is perceived as a threat not only by approximately half of Catholics (49 percent), the religiously unaffiliated (50 percent), and more than half of Protestants (56 percent), but also by more than one third of the Alevi Muslims in Germany. One in five of the nonreligious also views Christianity as a threat. Fewer than 10 percent of Muslims share that view. One fifth to one fourth of Catholics and Protestants also feel threatened by atheism—a proportion that rises to 37 percent among Sunni Muslims. The share of those who view Judaism as a threat is also higher among Sunni Muslims (25 percent) than among Shiite Muslims (13 percent), the nonreligious (13 percent), or Catholics (9 percent).

Anti-pluralists often oppose democracy. The negative perception of Islam is in part associated with an anti-Muslim political stance and often pairs with an anti-pluralist worldview. Most of those surveyed in the countries studied who perceive Islam as a threat can be described as concerned citizens. In a different category are certain minorities whose Islamophobic attitude leads to the political demand to halt the immigration of Muslims. In Austria, 26 percent of those surveyed hold this view, as do 23 percent in eastern Germany and 21 percent in the United Kingdom. In France, Switzerland and western Germany, this figure ranges from 13 to 15 percent. Correlation analyses further show that resentment is often not limited to Muslims, but extends to Jewish citizens as well, leading to an anti-pluralistic worldview that is coupled with rejection of various groups who are perceived as different. Individuals with anti-pluralistic attitudes also often tend to question the legitimacy of democracy.

Interreligious contacts help to counter mistrust. The perception of Islam as a threat promotes division and hostile attitudes as well as social distancing from Muslims. This fear thus poses a threat to the integration of Muslims and the political culture in Germany. It undermines interaction among people with differing worldviews and thus the cohesion of society as a whole. This impedes everyday contacts between Muslims and other members of society and fuels anti-pluralist and right-wing populist groups. Thus, the study shows that the most promising approach to diminishing the perception of Islam as a threat lies in personal interreligious contacts and an understanding of integration that does not view assimilation as the only goal. People who regularly come in contact with members of other religions less often report feeling threatened than do people without such contacts (40 versus 67 percent). The perception of being threatened is even less common among people who express support for a merging of different cultures (28 percent). By contrast, respondents who expect others to assimilate are significantly more likely to perceive Islam as a threat (69 percent).