

ISLAM IN AUSTRIA

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By E.S.W.

Austria is unique among the Western European countries insofar as it has granted Muslims the status of a recognized religious community. This dates back to the times following Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Austria has regulated the religious freedoms of the Muslim community with the constitutional law of 1878. This law was expanded and elaborated in 1912 with the so-called Law on Islam. This law, in turn, was reactivated in 1979 when the Islamic Religious Community in Austria (*Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich*) was founded and given the status of a religious organization and public corporationⁱ. This Law on Islam has led to the following:

- Exercise of religious freedom within the limits of the current jurisdiction of the Federal Constitutional Court.
- Free Religious instruction in schools as mandated by federal law.
- The Republic is obliged to provide instructional material and to pay religious instructors' salaries.
- The Republic has no influence over teaching personnel selection or the content of religious curriculum, which was last updated in 1983 and includes the portrayal of the replacement of a non-Muslim with a Muslim society.
- In 1988, a change to the federal law on Islam was passed, clarifying which religious schools in Islam were to be accepted and covered by the Law on Islam. Until then, only the Bosnian Hanefa school of jurisprudence had been accepted.

Recognition of a religion is not only limited to formal equal treatment of symbols and rituals; it is also a material right -, hence the public funding of religious institutions. A further significant pillar of recognition is the dialogue between State authorities and faith organizations.ⁱⁱ

There are currently 350 Muslim religious teachers in Austria, most of whom are non-German speakers from Turkey and Bosnia. However, foreign religious teachers are to be the exception, which can hardly be said in this case.

The Islamic Religious Community organizes teachers and is in charge of the content of the instruction, which according to law should be held in German. The purpose of the instruction is to improve students' knowledge of Islam and to encourage them to reflect upon and discuss issues related to religious identity and living as a Muslim in Austria. Since 1999, a private Islamic religious academy has been training religious teachers of Islam in Vienna.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Islamic Religious Community, according to its founding charter, claims to represent all Muslims in Austria, yet reality shows that executive offices of the Shura Council are exclusively staffed by Sunni Muslims. The president of the Community, Anas Shakfeh, is not only on the payroll of the Embassy of Saudi Arabia, which clearly points to the influence of Wahhabism in Austria, but was also an educational inspector, who said of himself, and I quote, "I am not able to oversee all of the Islamic classes organized in Austria" unquote. This remark came after a number of parents complained about teachers spreading inflammatory ideas.

Although an official separation of religion and state in Austria exists, Muslim officials ignore this by being elected to public office. One example is Omar Al-Rawi who is an elected member of the Vienna city council, representing the Social Democrats. Another example of the intertwining of religion and politics is Sivan Ekici, also a member of the Vienna city council representing the People's Party, whose husband works for the Turkish Embassy. Mr. Shakfeh, the president of the Religious Community, is also on the record as saying, "We do not want to make Islam European, because Islam is universal, period." On the basis of this comment, Bassam Tibi concluded that any dialogue was worthless and integration would certainly fail.^{iv}

In addition, mention must be made of the Muslim Brotherhood's influence in Austria. By building their own mosques, they are taking all aspects of Muslim integration into their own hands. Saudi Arabia has transferred millions of dollars to Vienna to aid the Islamization^v. A. M., the head of the Brotherhood in Austria, manages the Saudi funding in addition to being treasurer at the religious academy. Many mosques

affiliated with M. and the Brotherhood organize yearly summer camps in order to indoctrinate Muslim youth.^{vi}

Islam is the largest minority religion in Austria with approximately 4 % of the population according to the 2001 census. Most Muslims came to Austria after 1960 as "guestworkers" and later in the form of family immigration from Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. There are also communities of Arab and Pakistani origin.

There are currently over 280 mosques in Vienna, one of which is conspicuous with a minaret; however, most mosques are simply prayer rooms in the back of grocery stores, leading to parallel societies. These shops are opened on Sundays despite laws prohibiting the opening of stores. Police refrain from entering the premises and closing the shops because of the resulting bureaucratic hassle with the Islamic Community.

Of the approximately 400,000 Muslims out of a general population of 8.2 million in Austria, roughly 50% are Austrian citizens. The mass attitude toward Muslims is often hostile. Muslims face prejudice in social life and the labor market. Native Austrians are often heard to say that those who live in Austria must incorporate the customs and values of the Austrian people. Examples of issues where this argument has played a major role are the dispute over the height of a minaret and the conflict over the changing of opening hours of a public swimming pool in order to address the special needs of Muslim women.^{vii}

Similarly, an Austrian government study conducted in 2006 concluded that 45 % of Muslims are unwilling to integrate. This study caused an uproar, especially among the Muslim communities, who immediately claimed that they were being victimized by the study. However, according to the co-author of the study, the point of the study was to identify a problem area.

Although there are no readily available statistics for Muslim unemployment in Austria, the unemployment rate is more than 1.5 times higher for those of foreign birth, of which a substantial proportion is Muslim. The Austrian public employment service admits that women wearing hijab are unlikely to be hired^{viii}. When interviewed for Austrian television, a hijabed girl admitted to having been rejected on numerous occasions, which made her decide to open a tax consulting office. She would offer jobs to hijabed women only, thereby creating another entry to a parallel society.

Austria's political left chooses to ignore the dangers posed by the Islamization of Europe, particularly in Austria. The Social Democrats as well as the Greens Party rely heavily on the Muslim vote since the latter are accommodated by receiving preferential treatment.

On the other hand, the political right, such as the ill-famed Freedom Party, uses cheap slogans to foment fears about Islam in the population. We at the Austrian Association of Academics strongly believe that this is not the right way to combat Islamization. Thus we are grateful to the Austrian People's Party's continuing support of our quest to inform and educate people about the dangers of mixing Islam and politics. Selected politicians are finally realizing that the Austrian policy of Islam's being "a religion of tolerance and peace and has nothing to do with terrorism" has failed. With the encouragement of the Austrian Association of Academics, the People's Party has formulated its requirements for immigrants as follows:

1. We must first talk about responsibilities, then about rights.
2. Responsibilities include learning German, the willingness to work, and the integration into the Austrian "way of life" by sharing and accepting our system of values.

The Austrian Association of Academics was founded in 1953 by Rainhard Kamitz, then Minister of Finance. The Karl Martell Network, with its slogan of "giving the silent majority a loud voice", affiliated with the Austrian Association of Academics was founded in 2007 in order to coordinate organizations working against Islamization. The Network also functions as a competence center and engages in fundraising as well as documentation. In addition, it is currently conducting research projects covering religious sociology with groundbreaking results. In conclusion, I would like to tell you what we at the Karl Martell Network expect of Muslims and the Islamic Religious Community in Austria:

1. Finding out what book is currently being used for Islamic religious education. The book "The Lawful and the Prohibited" by Yusuf Al-Qaradawi was used until 2005, paid for by the Austrian taxpayer.

2. The law of 1912 had been issued for the special case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, of course not taking into consideration today's needs and without examining the teachings of Islamic doctrine. To this day it is not clear where Islamic law differs from Austrian law. It is therefore of vital importance to urgently request from the Islamic Religious Community **that it publicly explain the teachings of the Koran**. It is not acceptable that Muslim representatives evade questions about critical Koran verses, pretending that in order to understand them one has to be in command of classical Arabic or escaping into reproaches of racism and xenophobia. Even critical remarks based on thorough analysis are often dismissed as prejudice.
3. It is not clear to what extent the Islamic Religious Community represents all Muslims in Austria. There are some ethnic and religious groupings who doubt this claim of sole legitimate representation. Even Muslims often argue that a uniform Islam does not exist and that therefore a sole legitimate representation is not possible

Only a complete clarification of the above-mentioned questions can render **Islam credible** and prove

- whether Islamic principles contravene Austrian laws (separation of state and religion, equal treatment of both sexes, women and children's rights, right to leave the religious community, punishment according to Sharia law etc.);
- whether Islam is just a religion or a formalistic, aggressive, patriarchal and totalitarian ideology excluding every form of dialogue;
- whether the Muslim community's formula "integration through participation" means the return of religion into politics and the Islamization of Austria and Europe and that therefore the building of mosques, wearing headscarves etc. are to be judged within this context;
- the "special Austrian way" recognizing Islam as a religion will lead to a unilateral, short time modus vivendi in favor of the Muslims and that
- in the future the intercultural – presumably violent – clash will become unavoidable.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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ⁱ Rosenberger, “Governing Religious Diversity in Austria – A Framework for Europe?“, paper presented at the Symposium “Small States in a Global World”, April 7, 2006, Harvard University.

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ⁱⁱⁱ www.euro-islam.info, Country profiles Austria, December 2006

^{iv} “Die Zeit“: *Das ist keine Integrationspolitik*, Interview with Bassam Tibi, April 2006.

^v E-mail correspondence with journalist Stefan Beig, September 21, 2007.

^{vi} E-mail correspondence with journalist Stefan Beig, September 21, 2007.

^{vii} Rosenberger, “Governing Religious Diversity in Austria – A Framework for Europe?“, paper presented at the Symposium “Small States in a Global World”, April 7, 2006, Harvard University

^{viii} www.euro-islam.info, Country profiles Austria, December 2006