

Bridges or Roadblocks? Islamic Plurality and Tension in Juxtaposition to Christian Plurality and Unity in Germany

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Abstract

Animosity within Islam between people groups and sects is often intense. Indeed, some have fled their homeland seeking asylum as a direct result of the opposition they experienced. For many, their flight as asylum seekers has brought them to Germany. Meanwhile, Germany is a country with a diverse Christian community. Although historically marked by tension among the Christian groups, there have been, in recent years, significant attempts to pursue unity. This article seeks to identify the opportunities afforded diverse Christ followers in Germany as they build bridges to one another and unify around the person of Christ in engaging Muslims with the gospel.

Key Words: Muslim evangelism, diaspora ministry, ecumenism, Christian unity, Germany, Europe

Introduction

Twelve men gathered around our lunch table that afternoon in Heilbronn, Germany. Beyond their gender, these men shared only a handful of things in common: their flight from their home country in pursuit of asylum, their ability to speak Arabic, and their willingness to gather to read about the claims of Christ from the Injil. Apart from those commonalities, it seemed that we parted ways on different levels.

Our passports depicted diverse nationalities including Syria, Iraq, and (for me) the United States.

The mother-tongues of those at the table represented a wide spectrum. Although they all were able to speak Arabic, it was not, in every instance, their native language. (I was the exception here, as I only “speak Arabic” with the help of AI tools like Google Translate.) Arabic, Kurdish, Yezidi, and English were the mother tongues.

Religious backgrounds were also like a painter’s palette including Islam, Yezidi, and Christianity. Different shades of color were also present as, among the Muslims, there were those of Sunni and of Shia background. Among the Christians present, there were Orthodox and Evangelical.

On any given day in another context, each of us could have found ethnic or religious reasons to distance ourselves from the others—if not quarrel with or even persecute them. And these religious tensions are not only Christian with Muslim and vice versa. Differences between sectarian groups within Islam and branches of faith within Christianity have created their own conflicts. This paper seeks to briefly describe the historic tensions created by this pluralism and to propose a way forward in seeing Muslims embrace Christ in a multifaceted Christian context.

Islamic Tensions in Plurality

As illustrated in the opening story, human tendency toward categorization can be both constructive and inadequate. *Arab-speakers*, for example, points to an important shared ability but ignores some

significant differences among the men gathered. Similarly, *Muslim* refers to a common religious foundation but overlooks the value a person ascribes to their faith or the sectarian orientation of their faith. What, then, are some of the important points of unity and distinctions of plurality?

Ethnic and Inter-religious Tensions

While ethnic tensions within Islam are not the primary focus of this article, at least one recent example merits a brief mention (note that even here, the faith-related tentacles are impossible to separate). Kurds have long been the target of attack of many other ethnic groups in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. Recent conflict in Aleppo between Kurdish fighters and the Syrian army stems, at least in part, from these ethnic tensions (Pomeroy, 2026).

Some of the faith-related tensions between religious groups are, for the reader, well known, while others are likely less familiar. Christian/Islamic conflict likely belongs to the former, while the conflict between Islam and Yezidi is perhaps less well known—but no less serious. The most dramatic and bloody demonstration of this hostility came in August of 2014 when Sunni fundamentalists carried out a genocide of more than 5000 Yezidis (Stoker, 2025, pp. 31, 32).

But conflict and tension are not limited to the ethnic and broad stroke religious groups, be they Christians, Yezidis, or Muslims. Friction *within* the multifaceted Islamic and Christian faiths have surfaced repeatedly throughout history. This article addresses how, out of these inner-religious roadblocks, bridges can be built for the sake of the gospel.

Islamic Unity

What are, first of all, the unifying and isolating dimensions of Islam? The four holy books, five pillars, and six articles of faith represent elements universally embraced by Muslims worldwide. Muslims generally unite in embracing the Tawrad, Zabur, Injil, and Quran as holy books given by God. Among these, only the Quran is deemed unadulterated and authoritative in its current form.

Similarly, all Muslims embrace the five pillars. These include the witness of faith that acknowledges the oneness of God and Muhamad as His prophet. Muslims also rally around the second pillar, compulsory prayer to be expressed five times daily. Charitable gifts for the needy represent a third pillar valued by Muslims. Fasting during daylight hours of the month of Ramadan is a fourth pillar. Finally, the fifth pillar is a pilgrimage to Mecca for all who are able to make the journey (Edgar, 2002).

The six articles of Islamic faith provide yet another rallying point for Muslims. These include common beliefs around their doctrines of God, Angels, Scriptures, the Prophets, Future Life, and Divine Decree. When viewed only in terms of doctrinal titles, it might seem that Christianity holds much in common with Islam. The nuanced Islamic perspectives influenced by the Quran, the Hadith, and tradition merit a closer examination (The Six Pillars of Faith and Other Islamic Beliefs, 2006).

Islamic Plurality

Despite the commonalities within Islam, the sectarian differences are significant. Figure 1 graphically portrays the sects and their relationship to the two major Islamic branches: Sunni and Shia.

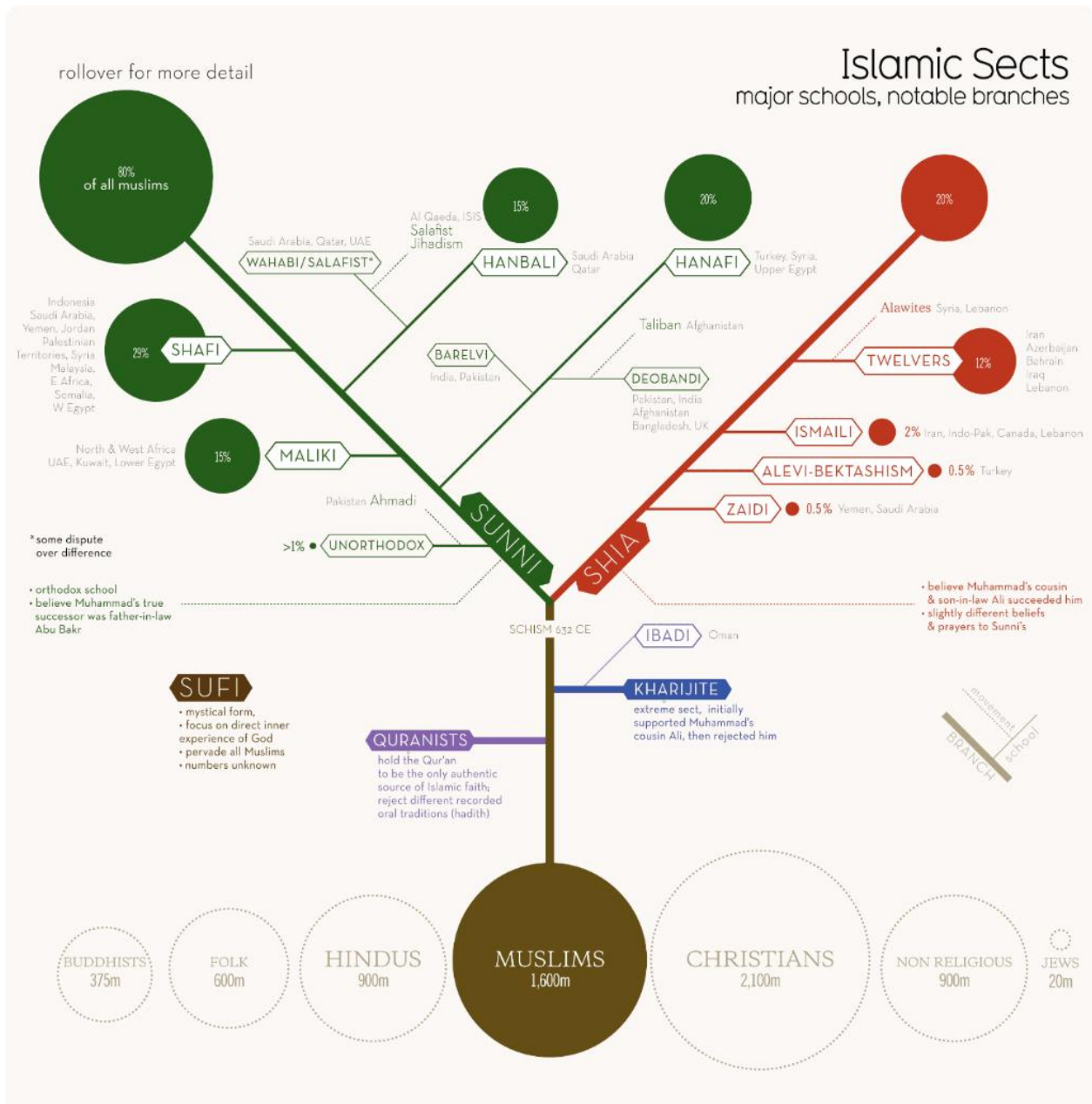


Figure 1: Islamic Sects: Major Schools, Notable Branches (Islamic Sects: major schools, notable branches, 2026)

Islamic Tension

Sunni and Shia distinguish themselves primarily in their recognition of different Muslim leaders after the death of Muhammad. Sunnis recognize Muhammad’s father-in-law, Abu Bakr. For Shias, Muhammad’s son-in-law, Ali, is deemed his successor (Abdulmajid, 2022, pp. 13, 14). Within these two branches are other major schools that distinguish themselves, in part geographically. But the differences within Shi’ism are also rooted in such beliefs as the number and identity of those with spiritual authority in the wake of Mohamed’s passing, the group’s military and territorial focus, and the symbolic vs. literal nature of Islam (Abdulmajid, 2022, p. 17).

Animosity between Sunni and Shia, and well as within each among their respective schools, is real. More than a difference of opinion over their founding fathers, they are also separated by ascribed terms of “orthodox” (Sunni self-perception) and “heterodox or even heretical” (Sunni perception of Shia Muslims) (Abdulmajid, 2022, p. 18). While these terms and historical differences are not often discussed in common conversations, the resultant and historical inferences of right/wrong, superiority/inferiority, or even “infidel”/devout (Holtmann, 2014, p. 144) fuels sectarian tensions. These tensions have contributed to the spreading of Arab-Springs-type conflicts in countries like Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. They have also played a key role in the influence of extremist Hezbollah and Houthi groups. Conflict has also arisen out of Iran’s vision for spreading Shia ideology in the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf region (Rizki, 2024).

But the tensions in these countries are not exclusively sectarian. Recent demonstrations (January 2026) in Iran serve as a case in point. Despite Iran’s relatively monolithic identity as a Shia nation, unrest attracted the world’s attention. (Iran is not only “Shi-ite” in terms of its majority religion, but also in that the regime identifies itself as an enforcer of the faith.) TIME magazine author Karl Vick points to the simmering undercurrent of “long-standing anger over social restrictions enforced by the state, including strict rules governing dress and personal behavior.” This simmer caused by oppression was brought to a boil as Iran’s economy went into a “free fall” on December 28, 2025 (Vick, 2026). [The more recent military attacks by the US and Israel, and Iran’s counterattacks, add to an ever-changing situation. – ed.]

Islamic Flight

Migration of any kind is typically prompted by various push and pull factors. These vary according to individual and type of migration (e.g., employment, education, war, retirement). However, asylum applicants share, in theory, common push and pull factors. The push factor is a sense that they are at “risk of persecution” or that their “life or liberty is placed in jeopardy.” At the same time, they are “pulled” by the desire to be granted protection from these dangers in the form of asylum. In Germany, the Office of Migration and Refugees assesses the validity of each application (The Stages of the Asylum Process, 2026).

With many caught in the crosshairs or crossfire of ethnic tensions, sectarian conflicts, and oppressive conditions, people by the thousands have fled to countries like Germany. In 2023 alone, of the roughly 350,000 asylum seekers coming to Germany more than 78% (275,000) were Muslim (Distribution of asylum applicants in Germany in 2023, by religion, 2025). Moreover, between 2013 and 2019 there were more than 1.4 million Muslim applicants between 2013 and 2019 (Das Bundesamt in Zahlen, 2020, p. 13); (Maddox, 2026, p. 1).

The German Christian Landscape

Despite frequent references to “secular Europe,” Germany has 47.5% Christian religious affiliation (including Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and “other Christians”). Given Germany’s history as the birthplace of the Reformation, one might assume that the religious landscape is a virtual monolith dominated by a Lutheran majority. With grievances with the Catholic Church over topics such as the payment of indulgences, Martin Luther and others faced great opposition in the sixteenth century. Since then, the Lutheran Church (“evangelische Kirche”) has indeed grown to be an influential church. Today, however, the number of Lutheran adherents is slightly lower than its Catholic counterparts. Together, these two faith convictions comprise an estimated 45% of the Germany population. Their rich heritage in Germany have made them the dominant Christian

organizations. Meanwhile, the Orthodox Church and other “free churches” (distinguished by their separation from the state, doctrinal freedom, and the voluntary funding) represent 2.5% of the population, as indicated in Figure 2 below:

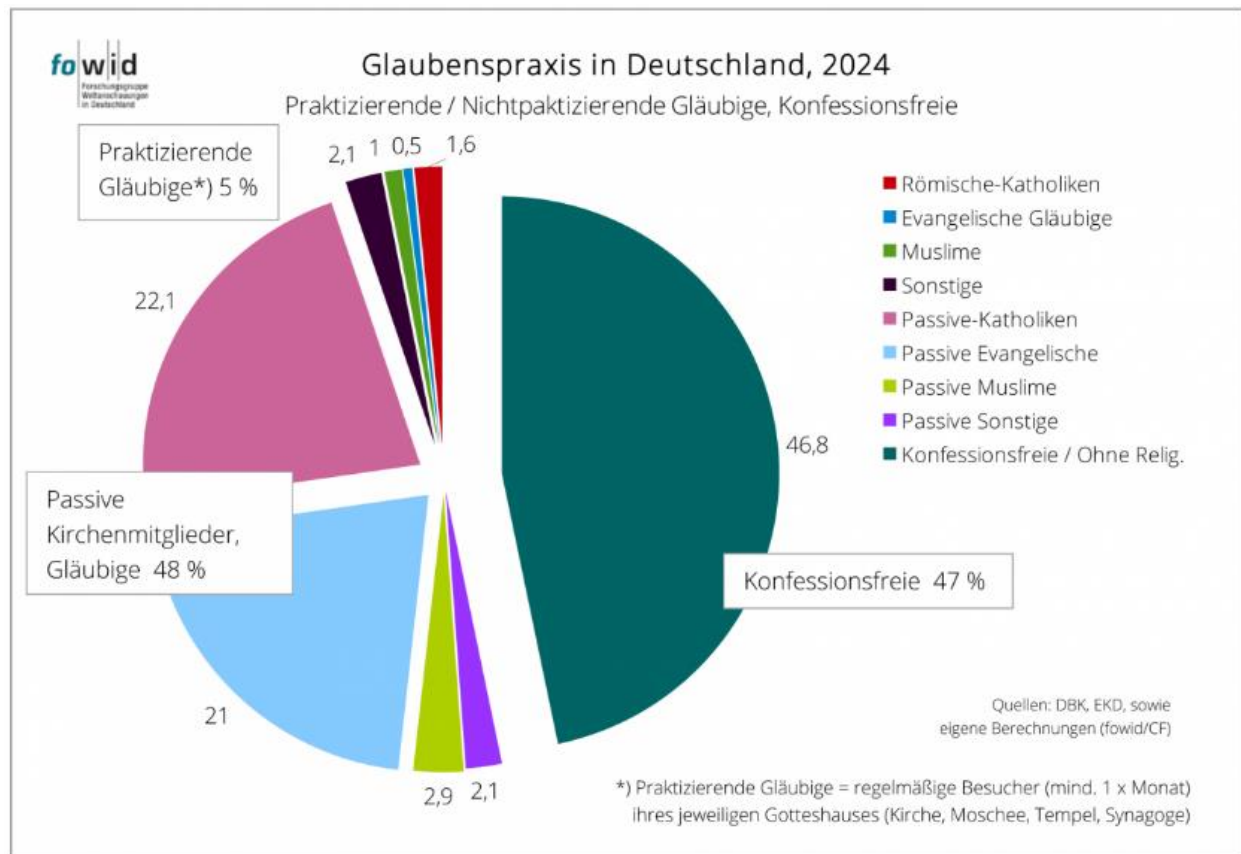


Figure 2: Religious Affiliation and Faith Practice in Germany 2024 (Religionszugehörigkeit 2024, 2025)

Declining State Church Participation

Although nearly half of Germans were members of the Catholic and Lutheran Churches in 2024, these numbers have seen a steep decline over the past two decades. In 1992, 57.0 million Germans (70.4% of the population) were members of these two churches. Meanwhile, research reports issued in 2023 indicated a combined membership of 38.9 million Germans (46.0% of the population) (Entwicklung der Kirchenmitglieder 1992-2023, 2024). Many of those leaving the state church are choosing not to realign with a specific religion. Thus, the number of “nones” has seen a significant increase.

Of course, affiliation is not necessarily indicative of sincere personal faith. As illustrated in Figure 2 above, the Research Group for World Perspective in Germany (Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland) describe 5% of faith adherents practicing their faith in terms of attending at least one time per month their respective houses of worship. Meanwhile, Joshua Project describes the land of the Reformation as being only 2.1% evangelical (Country: Germany, 2026). Joshua Project defines “evangelical” as “followers of Christ who generally emphasize:

- The Lord Jesus Christ as the sole source of salvation through faith in Him.
- Personal faith and conversion with regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

- A recognition of the inspired Word of God as the only basis for faith and living.
- Commitment to Biblical preaching and evangelism that brings others to faith in Christ.”
(Evangelical, 2026)

Perhaps “secular Europe” (at least as represented by Germany) is an accurate assessment after all.

A Significant Orthodox contingency

Tracing its roots to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD (Council of Chalcedon, 2025), the Orthodox Church in Germany claims nearly 4 million adherents, representing 2.5% of the population (Religionszugehörigkeiten 2024, 2025). Within Germany’s Orthodox community there are both Oriental and Eastern Orthodox churches.

A Growing Free Church Minority

Christian churches outside of the Catholic and Lutheran churches are typically referred to as “free churches,” because of their status independent of the state. Participation in these churches represents a meager 1.5% of German population. Included in this number are (among others) Baptist, Mennonite, Brethren, and a variety of charismatic churches (Religionszugehörigkeiten 2024, 2025). Their growth, slow as it has been, is often the result of evangelistic efforts and engagement of those disenchanting with and leaving the state church.

Tension and Conflict

One dare not sugarcoat the realities of tensions and even conflict within Germany’s increasingly diverse Christian church. As Gutman points out, Europe’s Thirty Years’ War in the first half of the seventeenth century traces its roots, at least in part, to frictions resulting from the establishment and growth of the Reformation (Gutman, 1988, pp. 754, 755). It is difficult to calculate the loss of life resulting from this war. Some have estimated roughly six million casualties as a direct result of war, hunger, and plague during that timeframe (Outram, 2001, pp. 152, 153). Although tensions would continue through the centuries ahead, Catholic and Lutheran churches experience a peaceful coexistence today.

The differences between evangelical adherents and their orthodox counterparts have caused these groups to question the orthodoxy of the other’s faith. Are the Orthodox misguided people to be evangelized or brothers and sisters in the faith to be embraced? Are Evangelicals sincere people, who have erred from the apostolic faith and that of the church fathers? Questions like these have caused tensions over the years.

With the rise of an increasing number of free (non-state) churches in Germany in the 1900’s, misunderstandings and tensions between the Evangelicals and Lutherans were also present. Bauer outlines the roots of this conflict in detail (Bauer, 2012). As an Evangelical in a free church in Germany in the early 1990’s, the author personally witnessed (and unfortunately participated in) this polemic, whereby both groups viewed each other with suspicion.

As one can see, then, the Christian landscape in Germany is diverse. There are significant differences in theology and expression. Tensions between these groups have found their historic highs in both recent and not so recent history. Nevertheless, global and local attempts to bridge the differences for the sake of the gospel are noteworthy.

Pursuit of Christian Unity

In an attempt to foster understanding between Evangelicals and Orthodox, the Lausanne Movement launched the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative (LOI) in 2010 (Initiatives: Lausanne Orthodox Initiative, 2026). The LOI strives “towards mutual respect, support and cooperation in the spirit of our Lord’s prayer for His Church in the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John.” This initiative defines itself as “a movement of Orthodox and Evangelical Christians who wish to respect each other’s beliefs, learn from each other, and support one another as we each obey the call to share God’s mission” (Lausanne Orthodox Initiative, 2026).

Similarly, the “evangelische Allianz Deutschland” (Evangelical Alliance Germany) seeks to reach across denominational boundaries and pursue unity among churches and Christian organizations (especially Lutheran and various evangelical, free churches). This alliance boasts of being the longest-standing association of Evangelicals (Geschichte der Evangelischen Allianz, n.d.). Together, this voluntary network of churches desires to provide “a network for unity, shared prayer, shared faith, shared witnessing of the Gospel, shared pronouncements on socially relevant issues, and taking responsibility in our world based on our shared faith” (Selbstverständnis, n.d.).

The “Arbeitsgemeinschaft christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland” (ACK: “Working Fellowship of Christian Churches in German”) is a voluntary ecumenical network of churches. These churches seek to “travel together along the path towards visible unity of the church” (Eastill, 2025) (Original: “Wir gehen zusammen auf dem Weg zur sichtbaren Einheit der Kirche...”).

Specifically in the city of Heilbronn (where the author lives), a local composite of spiritual leaders from both state and free churches has formed. “Gemeinsam for Heilbronn” (“Together for Heilbronn”) provides a context for the free flow of information and cooperative prayer for the individual churches and their collective impact in the city. In addition to their monthly meetings as leaders, the group plans and executes two annual prayer emphases and an annual “Serve the City” event, all of which incorporate congregants from the respective local churches in their diversity.

In summary, while the differences among Christians are not insignificant, the broad collective efforts to acknowledge, maintain, and pursue Christian unity (Eph. 4:3) are a witness to the origin of Christ from the Father and His love for all people (Jn. 17:20-23). Of course, the willingness to cooperate with the ecumenical, evangelical, and local efforts is an individual decision. For some, the risks seem too great. In extreme cases, the polemic banter through social media, written materials, and debate emphasizes differences and disunity. But in other instances, what is held in common far outweighs the differences and minimizes the risks. In the end, however, it is the perception among Muslims about Christianity as a religion in conflict or a unified faith that may either enhance or diminish their perspective of Christianity. Do they, based on limited or vast information and impressions, have a favorable or unfavorable assessment of Christianity? How does this perception contribute to their movement towards or away from Christ?

Understanding Muslim Conversion

Ultimately, spiritual new birth among Muslims (as with all people) is a work of the Spirit of God (Jn. 3:5-8; Tit. 3:5). From a human vantage point, researchers like Dr. Reinhold Strähler have explored some of the common contributors to Muslim conversion. In his book *Einfach und komplex zugleich: Konversionsprozesse und ihre Beurteilung (Simple and Complicated at the Same Time: Conversion Processes and Their Assessment)*, Strähler points out factors contributing to Muslim conversion. Based on his social science research, he describes both cognitive and

affective elements, which play a significant part as Muslims come to faith in Christ as Savior (Strähler, Einfach und komplex zugleich: Konversionsprozesse und ihre Beurteilung, 2021).

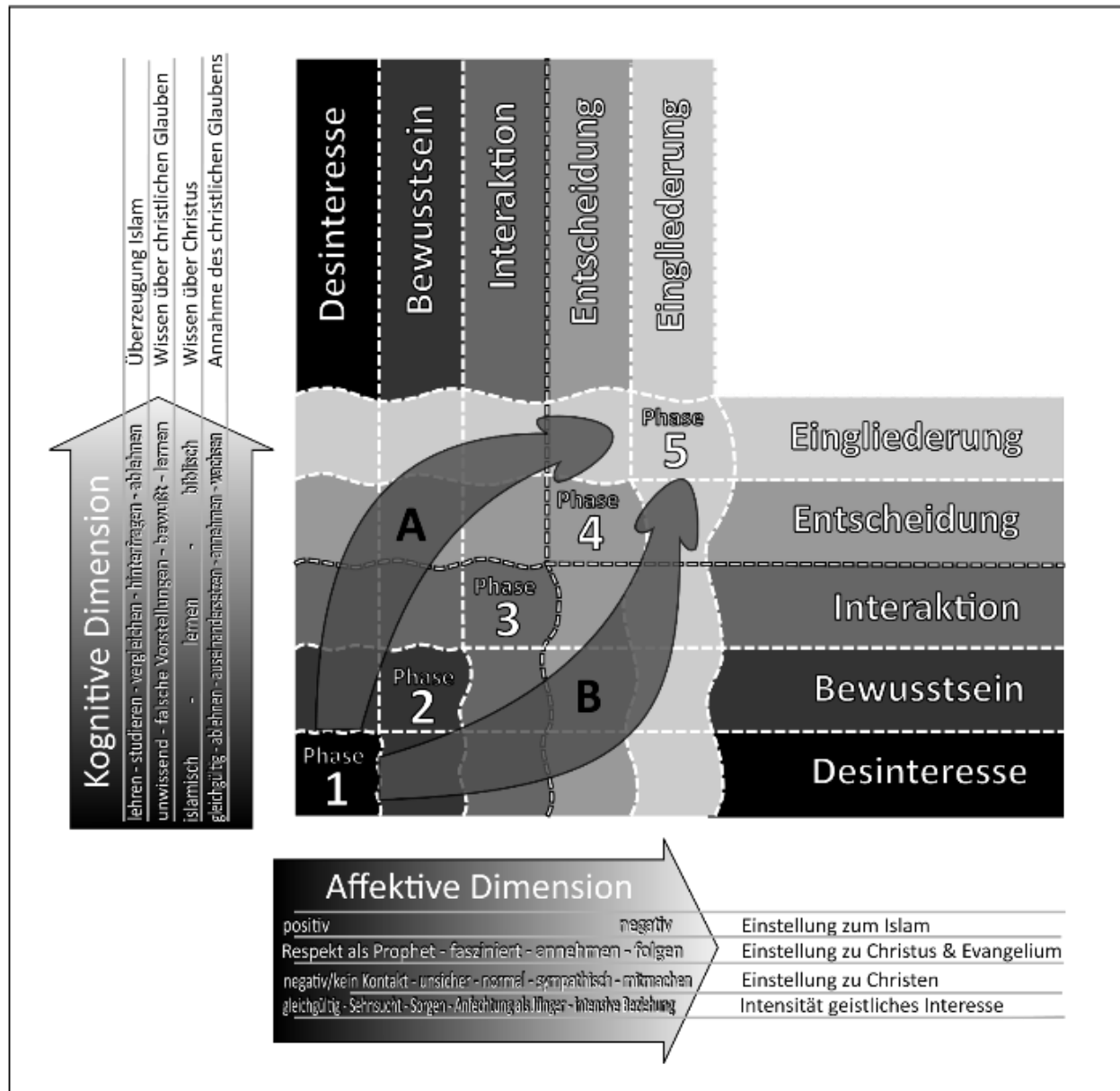


Figure 3: Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Muslim Conversion (Strähler, Einfach und komplex: Konversionsprozesse verstehen Konvertiten begleiten, 2023)

Figure 3 (albeit in German) outlines a Muslim's journey to faith from disinterest (*Desinteresse*) to consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) to interaction (*Interaktion*) to decision (*Entscheidung*) and ultimately to inclusion (*Eingliederung*). While for some the journey may be either predominantly cognitive or affective, it would be wrong to conclude that, for either, the journey is totally devoid of aspects of both.

For the purpose of this article, Strähler's description of the affective elements are particularly noteworthy. The converts' affective responses were influenced by positive and negative contacts

and impressions. Specifically, their attitude towards Islam (*Einstellung zu Islam*), Christ and the gospel (*Einstellung zu Christus & Evangelium*), and toward Christians (*Einstellung zu Christen*) were key (see bottom right of Figure 3 above).

Conclusion

Islam is defined as a “religion of submission.” As a word, “Islam” is also closely related to the Arabic term for “peace” (*salaam*). As such, some also describe the Muslim faith as a “religion of peace.” History, both distant and recent, places that second definition in question. Despite the aspects held in common by all Muslims, Islam’s plurality is not inconsequential. The differences within the different sects of Islam have led to verbal accusations and attacks. Much more, the conflict has led to persecution (including physical) of sectarian groups by fellow Muslims. Over the last 15 years, this cross-sectarian persecution and even oppression of fellow Shias or Sunnis within Islamic countries have resulted in tension, bloodshed, and personal flight whereby Muslims fled in pursuit of asylum. With this tainted backdrop, hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers now find themselves in countries like Germany.

An exploration of Christianity within Germany is also replete with its own diversity. Not unlike Islam, history also reports Christianity’s own internal conflicts that have manifested themselves in arguments, loss of life, and personal flight. Recent history, however, reveals more amicable discussions of differences and a more intentional pursuit of unity around the elements held in common by the respective Christian groups.

Given these realities of Islamic internal conflict and Christianity’s pursuit of peace and unity (nuanced and qualified as both sets of realities are), how can followers of Christ in Germany best engage the Islamic community (especially those seeking asylum)?

First, Christians can help Muslims applying for asylum face the internal tensions within Islam. For some, this might mean raising their sense of awareness (Strähler’s “consciousness”) of the root causes for their flight. Of course, polemicists have long sought to address these Islamic contradictions and points of disunity. But not every follower of Christ is gifted or equipped to engage in such debate. For those who have fled persecution in pursuit of asylum, there is also often a traumatic element. Such pain points to the validity of the use of a gentler conversational approach in the context of relationship.

With many Muslims, little must be done to prompt their personal recognition of Islam’s internal conflicts. They have not only experienced them but are keenly aware of them. This awareness can drive them (among other things) towards nominal Islamic faith, towards atheism, or towards gospel curiosity. Although anecdotal and deserving of further research, the author’s own experience confirms this. The majority of Muslim asylum seekers he encounters in Germany are already nominal in their faith at best. And of those, in witnessing conversions from Islam to Christianity over the past four years, every individual had experienced often unspeakable horrors in the name of their former religion. These experiences led to an abandonment of their faith and, later, to commitment to Christ.

Followers of Jesus must, then, find sensitive ways of enabling asylum-seeking Muslims identify the internal tensions within Islam.

Second, since this approach of pointing asylum seeking Muslims toward Islamic conflict and tension is insufficient without the corresponding good news of Christ, Christians must also share

the gospel. This powerful message (Rom. 1:16) is further validated when Christian unity is its backdrop. In the midst of the global church's plurality, she must rediscover her unity.

Although once again anecdotal, the author's own experience points to the value of gospel witness attested by Christian unity. He works in a team consisting of free and state church members, of charismatics and cessationists. Reasons for polarization are manifold. Even so, while the team has now always worked perfectly and without internal challenges, rallying around their common passion for the message of the crucified, buried, resurrected, and ascended Savior, they have witnessed dozens of Muslims confess Christ over the course of more than two decades.

Similarly, theological and practical differences between groups in the broad Christian community are of importance and should not be washed away in a stream of insignificance. Discussion (even lively debate) about differences is merited. Still, Christ followers must take seriously the command of Paul in Ephesians 4:3: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." By portraying and pursuing the peace that is inherent to our union in one body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, and Father (Eph. 4:4-6), the gravity of the Christian message intensifies.

Further Research

Reinhold Strähler's research (referenced earlier) drawing attention to the cognitive and affective elements of Muslim conversion in asylum settings is incredibly insightful. Still, further research on the affective elements is merited. Such research should aid the development of Christians' practical evangelistic skills. Christ's witnesses should also grow in their capacities to sensitively speak to disillusionment with Islam and to pursue and demonstrate greater unity.

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