Religious tolerance is widespread – but it does not extend to Islam

In conjunction with the 70th anniversary of Germany's Basic Law, this edition of our Religion Monitor looks at the relationship between religion and political culture. Fundamental democratic principles and values enjoy broad support among members of the various religions. A majority also approve of religious tolerance, which is crucial for peaceful coexistence in a diverse society. However, not all religions are equally included.

Dr. Yasemin El-Menouar

In Germany, a majority of members of the various religions believe that democracy is a good form of government. This is one finding of the study "Religious Diversity and Democracy," based on our 2017 Religion Monitor and a follow-up survey in 2019. According to the findings, 89 percent of the German population supports democracy. Among Christians, 93 percent of those surveyed express this view, as do 91 percent of Muslims and 83 percent of the nonreligious. Approximately 80 percent of German citizens also value the protection of minority interests as a fundamental principle of liberal democracy.
When it comes to respect for religious diversity, however, there is still room for improvement. The study found that in principle, 87 percent of those surveyed are open to other worldviews. Approximately 70 percent say that other religions also contain elements of truth; these respondents are considered religiously tolerant. But only about 50 percent of respondents in Germany hold the view that religious plurality enriches society. In regard to Islam, this share is even lower: Only one third of the population regards Islam as enriching. In contrast, a majority view Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism as enriching.

Overall, about half of those surveyed perceive Islam as a threat. This proportion is higher in eastern Germany, at 57 percent, than in western Germany (50 percent). These findings, recorded in spring 2019, are largely similar to the results of previous Religion Monitor surveys taken in 2013, 2015, and 2017. “Evidently, many people nowadays view Islam more as a political ideology and less as a religion and therefore not deserving of religious tolerance,” explains Yasemin El-Menouar, our expert on religion. In her view, this has been amplified by the societal debates and media reports of past years, which often cast Islam in a negative and critical light.

**Skepticism regarding Islam does not necessarily mean Islamophobia**

We took a closer look at the share of the population that views Islam as a threat. The conclusion: It is important to draw distinctions here. “Although our study shows that skepticism about Islam is fairly widespread, this is not necessarily equivalent to Islamophobia,” El-Menouar says. “Many people express reservations about Islam but do not follow up with political demands or antidemocratic views.” She notes that only a minority of citizens exhibit a clearly Islamophobic attitude, such as by calling for a ban on Muslim immigration.

The overall proportion of people with an Islamophobic attitude in Germany has declined in recent years, according to the Religion Monitor, from 20 percent in 2017 to just 13 percent in 2019. The analyses also show that individuals with clearly Islamophobic attitudes often reject other minorities as well as Muslims, and their overall worldview is anti-pluralist.

**Rejection of diversity is harmful to democracy**

Additional findings of the Religion Monitor: Approval of democracy as a good form of government declines to 68 percent among people with a clearly Islamophobic attitude – more than 20 percentage points lower than in the population as a whole. The results are similar with regard to the protection of
minority interests: This democratic principle also finds approval among only two thirds of those who express opposition to the immigration of Muslims.

Even though clearly Islamophobic attitudes are expressed by only a minority, and this has even declined somewhat, the widespread skepticism about Islam gives cause for concern. The reason: "Existing reservations open the door for right-wing populist groups and parties — worries and fears can be instrumentalized and turn skepticism into rejection," says religion expert El-Menouar.

**Personal contact among religious groups fosters successful coexistence**

One important finding of the Religion Monitor is that people who have regular contact with members of other religions less often perceive religious diversity and Islam as a threat. In this group, 46 percent even regard Islam as a form of enrichment. By contrast, among the individuals who rarely have personal contact with members of other religions, 64 percent view Islam as a threat. Yasemin El-Menouar emphasizes:

"*These studies, and our everyday experience, show that people of different faiths generally get along well in day-to-day life.*"

Yasemin El-Menouar, Bertelsmann Stiftung expert on religion

El-Menouar continues: "This is exactly where practical projects can focus and deliberately promote personal encounters and the exchange of views in an effort to reduce prejudices, strengthen trust, and foster successful coexistence. In particular, communities are called upon to create spaces for people to meet and interact."

For example, children in childcare centers and schools – regardless of denomination – could be taught about religion and religious diversity. This would allow children to talk about the commonalities and differences of their various religious backgrounds and learn from one another. "Our surveys show how much we share, such as core democratic values and the desire to live together in peace. That is why it is important to engage in open dialogue with members of other religions," says religion expert El-Menouar.
Executive Summary of the Study

Our Religion Monitor regularly conducts international comparison studies on the importance of religion for social cohesion. It is based on representative surveys of the population. On our behalf, Professor Gert Pickel at the University of Leipzig analyzed this data to ascertain the role of religious diversity in the political culture of democracies.

The study findings are based on data from the 2017 Religion Monitor and the 2019 follow-up survey. The 2017 Religion Monitor contains representative data for Germany (approximately 1,500 respondents) as well as for Austria, Switzerland, France, the United Kingdom, and Turkey (approximately 1,000 respondents each). Additional special surveys of the Muslim population in these countries (not including refugees who have arrived since 2010) yielded more precise statements about the largest religious minority in Europe (approximately 1,000 respondents in Germany and about 500 in each of the other countries).
As part of the 2019 Religion Monitor follow-up survey, the Infas Institute for Applied Social Sciences in Bonn also conducted a representative survey of approximately 1,000 people in Germany. The special analysis titled "Religious Diversity and Democracy: How Religious Plurality Affects the Political Culture" is the fourth in a series of Religion Monitor publications.