The Muslim population in Western Europe has been growing since the 1960s. In most countries, Muslims now make up more than five percent of the total population. Despite social tensions, integration is making clear progress. This is the central finding of our Religion Monitor 2017.

Stephan Vopel

The integration of Muslim immigrants in Western Europe is making clear progress. By the second generation at the latest, the majority have entered mainstream society. This is evident in the findings of our Religion Monitor 2017, which investigated the language competence, education, working life and interreligious contacts of Muslims in France, the UK, Austria, Germany and Switzerland. The successful integration is all the more notable because none of
these five countries offer consistently good opportunities for participation, and Muslims encounter open rejection from about one fifth of the population.

Despite their different countries of origin, different creeds and different reasons for migrating, the integration of the nearly 14 million Muslims in these five countries tends to run a similar course. Muslims seize the opportunities for participation that arise, and they want to continue practicing their religion. Although the latter is not readily accepted by mainstream society, it does not hinder integration. "Islam is not an obstacle to integration. Muslims, even the highly religious, learn the new language and strive for higher education levels just as much as other immigrants," says Stephan Vopel, our expert on social cohesion.

"When integration stalls, the state framework conditions are usually the reason."

Stephan Vopel, Bertelsmann Stiftung expert on social cohesion

Religious affiliation does not impede integration

Thus, in all these countries the educational level in Muslim families rises from generation to generation. In the second generation, 67 percent of children stay in school past their 17th birthday. However, there are variations in the pace at which the mean school completion rates for Muslim children align with those of all children. France is particularly successful; there, only 11 percent of Muslims leave school before their 18th birthday. The results are less satisfactory in Germany and Switzerland, where the school systems separate children at an early age.

However, it is in Germany and Switzerland that Muslims are most successful in integrating into the job market. In both these countries, the rate of gainful employment among Muslims no longer differs from that of the total population. Immigrants there benefit significantly from the high demand for labor. But contributing factors also include expedited work permits that open up the labor market, along with community job placement initiatives and language courses. In France, with its tight and relatively impermeable job market, even Muslims with good school-leaving qualifications are more likely to be unemployed and less likely to work full time.

Strong connection with the new homeland

Overall, almost half (49 percent) of Muslims in these five countries learned the national language during childhood as their first language. Here too, there is a
definite increase from the first to the second generation (from 27 to 76 percent). By far the leader is France, where 93 percent of the immigrant children born in the country grow up with the French language.

Another indication of successful integration is that 75 percent of Muslims regularly spend their free time with non-Muslims. Interreligious contact also increases with each generation, as does identification with the receiving country. Overall, nearly all of those surveyed (94 percent) feel connected to the country where they live.

This level of integration is not always appreciated; 20 percent of citizens questioned say they do not want to have Muslims as neighbors. Wariness of Islam is lowest in France (14 percent), highest in Austria (28 percent). Muslims who profess their faith and practice their religion also encounter discrimination in the labor market. Everywhere except in the UK, highly religious Muslims—and 41 percent of Muslims can be identified as such—have more difficulty than less devout Muslims finding a job that corresponds to their qualifications.

"So far, no country in Western Europe has found a convincing strategy that addresses both equal opportunity as well as respect for religious diversity."

Yasemin El-Menouar, Islam expert at the Bertelsmann Stiftung

Three core strategies for advancing integration and cohesion

In France, many Muslims are frustrated by discrimination in the labor market. The result: France is the only country in which the feeling of being connected with the country declines among Muslims in succeeding generations. In the UK, the institutional parity of Islam with other religious groups enables Muslims to practice their religion without detriment to their careers. On the other hand, there is relatively little contact between Muslims and people of other faiths. They are more likely to live their everyday lives in parallel rather than in the community.

The Religion Monitor 2017 has identified three core strategies for advancing integration and cohesion in Western European societies: First, improve opportunities for participation, especially in the employment and educational systems. Second, accord Islam the same legal status as other institutional religious groups, thereby recognizing religious diversity. And third, promote intercultural contacts and interreligious discussion, for example in schools, in neighborhoods and in the media.
Background Information

The Religion Monitor regularly carries out an international comparison of the role of religion in social cohesion. The study is based on representative surveys of the population. On our behalf, Professor Dirk Halm and Dr. Martina Sauer of the Center for Turkish Studies and Research on Integration at the University of Duisburg-Essen analyzed these findings as the basis for “The Social Integration of Muslims in Europe.”
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