

Resources for promoting solidarity

Religion makes a difference

English Summary





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Religion(s) – an underestimated resource for promoting solidarity?

Yasemin El-Menouar

Acting in solidarity means standing up for one another, taking responsibility together and working towards a just society. In challenging times, when conflicts are increasing and divisions loom, the resource of solidarity – and thus a steadfast focus on what we have in common – becomes even more important.

The past few years have been defined by multiple crises. They have shown us the valuable social benefits that accrue when people act in solidarity. For example, we would not have been able to overcome the Covid pandemic if members of the younger generation had not restricted their everyday lives for the benefit of more vulnerable demographic groups. After the catastrophic flooding that struck Germany's Aartal valley in 2021, thousands of volunteers donned rubber boots and turned up ready to lend a hand. National borders have also been overcome: As early as 2015/16, when hundreds of thousands fled to Europe from the civil war in Syria and other conflicts, numerous people went the extra mile to provide help and were not put off by those who disparaged this "culture of welcome." In February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, an overwhelming willingness to get involved became evident once again, even though many of Germany's communities had already reached their limits. It is particularly remarkable that many people were even ready to take refugees into their own homes. One year later, an earthquake devastated southeast Turkey and northwest Syria, claiming the lives of tens of thousands. Rescue teams immediately arrived from around the world to find survivors and care for people in the disaster zone. In addition to this active assistance, millions of individuals and busi-

nesses donated money and assembled care packages.

We have seen similar waves of solidarity in the past, for example after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010. The willingness to help has also been documented by the German Fundraising Association's Donation Monitor, which shows that the amount of money donated by Germans has increased steadily over the last 20 years.¹ Relative to their income, people with less money have even contributed more than their wealthier counterparts. These examples illustrate how much our globalized world has grown together in human terms – and how much people are willing to help in difficult times.

Faith-based communities and the numerous aid organizations with religious affiliations (such as the Network of Jewish Human Services Agencies, as well as Diakonie, Caritas and the Red Crescent) have played a significant role here. Thanks to their contacts with congregations around the world and their projects, such as those carried out as part of development cooperation efforts, they are particularly well positioned to organize assistance across national borders. At the same time, they have a well-established culture of solidarity. This is expressed not only in the collection of donations that happens regularly during religious services and on religious holidays, but also in practical assistance – for example projects that aid

¹ More recently, donations have fallen slightly (Deutscher Fundraising Verband 2023a). However, the share of people who donated money in 2023 was still significantly higher than in 2021 (Deutscher Fundraising Verband 2023b, 2022, 2021).

refugees. In 2015, for instance, Muslim communities in particular spent months taking in people who arrived in Germany via the Balkans. Another example: Berlin's Stadtmission, which provided soup, tea and information to tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, including many women and children, at the city's central station in 2022 (for additional examples of religious groups' social engagement, see Gerlach et al. 2023). Religious communities also get involved and work together locally and globally to promote peace, environmental issues and sustainability (see e.g. Diefenbacher 2015 and the Interfaith Statement on Climate Change at the COP28 Climate Change Conference²).

In previous Religion Monitor studies, we were able to show that people with a religious affiliation are more committed to helping others than people without an affiliation – not least because of the informal structures that exist in their faith-based communities which make it possible to do so (Nagel and ElMenouar 2017; Hillenbrand et al. 2023). In recent decades, however, the religious landscape in Germany has changed markedly. Both of the country's two main churches have witnessed a massive decline in membership; less than one person in two in Germany now belongs to the Protestant or Catholic church (ElMenouar 2022). At the same time, the country is experiencing an unprecedented pluralization of religion, largely due to immigration (Mücke et al. 2023). Numerous religious minorities are now at home and have established their own faith-based structures in Germany. What impact are these changes having on the resources German society has at its disposal for showing solidarity?

2 <https://www.partner-religion-development.org/global-faith-leaders-summit-interfaith-state-ment-for-cop28/#:~:text=It%20calls%20for%20decisive%20measures,solidarity%2C%20responsibility%2C%20and%20hope.>

Solidarity and social cohesion

In public debates and political speeches, lamentations about dwindling social cohesion and waning social solidarity have become a fixed talking point. In our Social Cohesion Radar, which the Bertelsmann Stiftung has been using since 2012 to examine the state of social relations, we have been able to show that, despite all the prophecies of doom, social cohesion has remained relatively stable in recent years. However, crises like the pandemic and the war in Ukraine with all its consequences have taken their toll on social cohesion. A representative study for the state of Baden-Württemberg shows that people now have less trust in their fellow human beings, in social networks and in the level of solidarity in the state (Arant et al. 2022). Initial analyses of a nationwide Social Cohesion Radar survey from 2023 (forthcoming) show that this trend holds for the country in general. Whether this means that social cohesion has already suffered long-term damage or that populist forces are at work promoting division remains to be seen (Mau et al. 2023).

In other words, it is worth taking a closer look at the different dynamics playing a role here. Our empirical studies are based on a multidimensional concept of social cohesion, one that consists of stable, trusting and diverse social relationships, a positive emotional connection with the community, and people's willingness to take responsibility for others by getting involved and showing solidarity. This makes it clear that solidarity is crucial for the quality of our social interactions. Just as important is how much people experience a sense of solidarity within society and to what degree they themselves are willing to act in solidarity with others. Additional contributing factors include the trust people have in social institutions and whether they perceive society to be just.

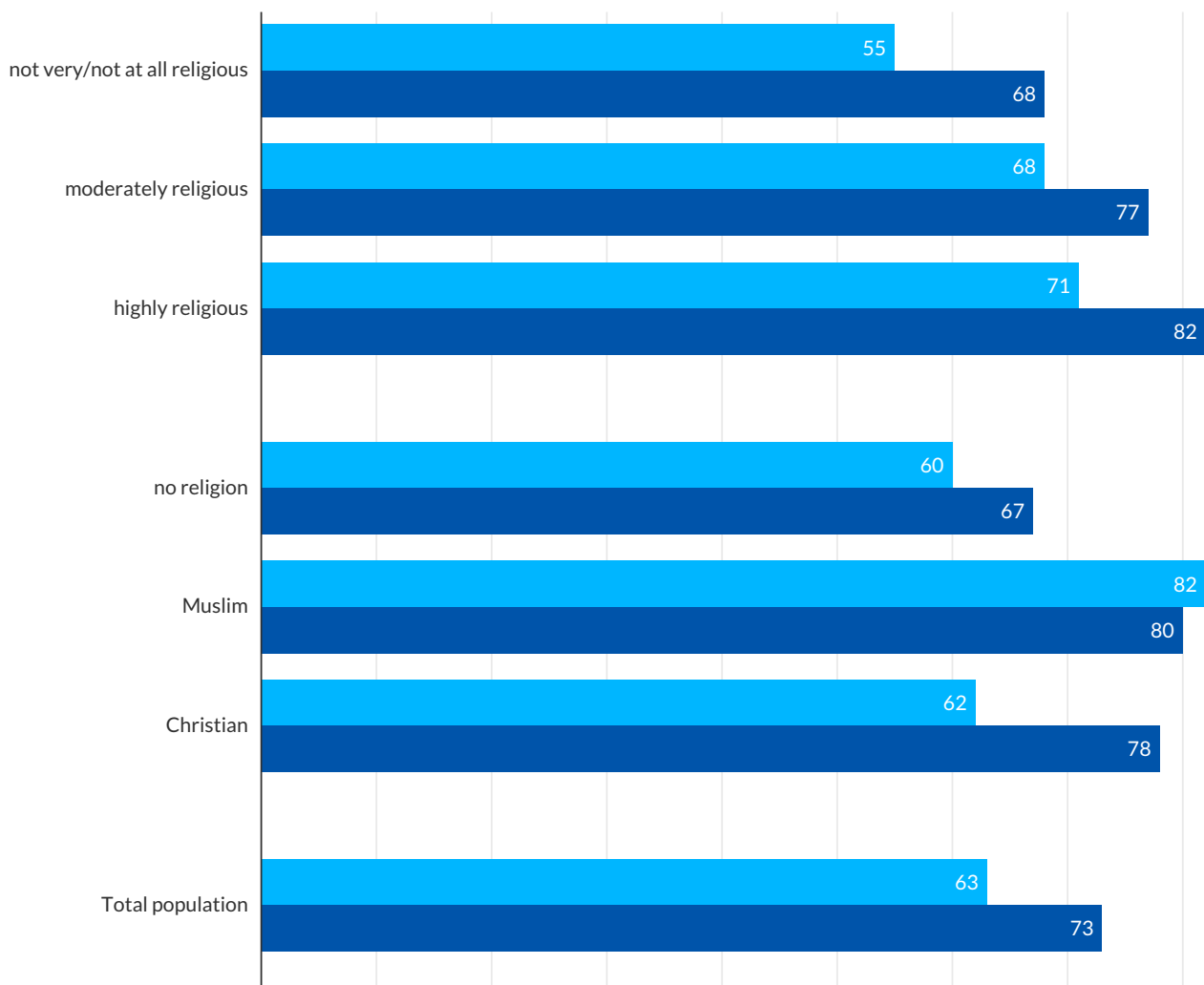
Focus of this study

This 2023 Religion Monitor study takes a comprehensive look at solidarity as a dimension of social cohesion. To that end, we examined the solidarity-related resources available to German society, the extent of these resources and the role that religion plays in them. The aim was to understand the mechanisms on which social solidarity is based.

Overall, the data show that despite – or perhaps because of – current crises, the situation in Germany is stable in terms of the resources the country has at its disposal for showing solidarity. These resources can be seen in the large amounts of money that are regularly donated to good causes, for example. The willingness to show solidarity is largely activated by events in a person’s immediate environment or own country, but

Willingness in Germany to donate, by religion and religiosity (in %)

■ Aid organization asks for donations for earthquake victims in developing country ■ Aid organization asks for donations for flood victims in Germany



Source: Religion Monitor 2023; Basis: German population 16 years or older (N = 4,363), valid cases, weighted.

Religion Monitor 2023 – Methodology

Data for the 2023 Religion Monitor were collected by the infas Institute for Applied Social Science on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. As in the previous waves in 2009, 2013 and 2017, the statistical population is the German population aged 16 or older. For the Religion Monitor's German survey, a sample selected from the country's official register of residents was used for the first time as it represents the current best method of providing a sample for population surveys. This approach was supplemented by a sample based on an online access panel; the two samples were linked using the appropriate weighting procedures.

The combined dataset with N = 4,363 complete interviews is the foundation for analyzing the German data (N = 2,038 from the official register and N = 2,325 from the online panel). The dataset contains additional information on individuals of the Muslim faith, whose share was adjusted during the weighting procedure based on corresponding estimates from the sample taken from the official register of residents.

Surveys were also conducted in France, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, the UK and the US based on online access panels. The statistical population for the international modules was comprised of individuals aged 16 or older living in each country and having Internet access. In the national online access panels, quota-based samples differentiated by age group, gender and region within the respective countries were also taken and subsequently weighted. The international modules were not supplemented with additional data for the Muslim population.

The total dataset is comprised of 10,657 respondents distributed as follows: Germany: N = 4,363 respondents; France: N = 1,065; Netherlands: N = 1,051; Spain: N = 1,046; Poland: N = 1,046, UK: N = 1,045; US: N = 1,041. The surveys took place in June and July 2022.

also extends beyond national borders. For example, almost three people in four would donate money to help flood victims in Germany if asked to do so by an aid organization. And, at 63 percent, a majority would also give money to assist earthquake victims in a developing country.

That is a source of hope. At the same time, we see that social solidarity cannot be taken for granted and that it rests on a fragile foundation. If the loss of trust in social institutions as guarantors of justice and the common good continues, then we can expect people to be less willing to stand in solidarity with others. Extensive contextual analyses by the authors of our study suggest this is the case.

Their research also shows that religion – especially when it is a lived practice associated with a faith-based community – can strengthen social solidarity. People who are religious in this way exhibit a higher level of solidarity and are more optimistic about what society has to offer. For example, the willingness to donate money for flood victims in Germany or earthquake victims in a developing country increases the more religious a person is; among the highly religious, figures are as high as 82 and 71 percent, respectively.

Finally, our study shows that religious minorities contribute significantly to social solidarity. For example, a vast majority of Muslims say they would be willing to help victims of natural disasters occurring both in Germany (80 percent) and in other countries (82 percent). More needs to be done to promote religion's inherent potential in this area and to make its contributions felt throughout society.

We would like to express our thanks here to the authors Anette Schnabel, Ulf Tranow and Marcel Mücke for their valuable analyses and insights, which you can read about in greater detail in the German-language version of this publication. We have summarized the key findings below.

Key findings

German society has stable resources for acting in solidarity. In the 12 months prior to the survey carried out for this study, two-thirds of the respondents in Germany made a donation to a good cause, 72 percent of which was in the form of money. That shows that people can count on social support even – or especially – in times of multiple crises, despite an economic downturn and a tense political situation. The vast majority would also be willing to contribute in the future: On average, the respondents say they would give away €9,000 if they were to win €100,000 in the lottery – an important indicator of their willingness to stand in solidarity with others. At the time of the survey, moreover, one-quarter of respondents were volunteering their time. That is a relatively low figure; the limited possibilities for getting involved during the pandemic were presumably still having an effect.

Religion strengthens social solidarity. The willingness to donate is more pronounced among people with a religious affiliation than among those with no affiliation: While 71 percent of Christian and 69 percent of Muslim respondents donated to a charity in the past year, only 59 percent of those who do not adhere to a religion did so. Differences in volunteering also correlate with religious attitudes: While only 17 percent of people without a religious affiliation and no religious socialization donate their time, the figure is almost twice as high, at 31 percent, among those with a religious affiliation. The likelihood that people will volunteer also increases if they had a religious upbringing, even if they do not currently have a religious affiliation. This shows that having a faith-based background and the resulting experience of being part of a religious congregation has a lasting impact on a person's attitudes towards contributing to the common good. The Religion Monitor data suggest that if people are to show solidarity, the structures must be present that allow them to do so, such as those offered by faith-based communities,

but that such behavior is also associated with a basic attitude towards solidarity which is promoted by religious beliefs.

On the whole, solidarity is seen as characteristic of German society. A clear majority feel positively about the current state of solidarity in Germany: Three-quarters say they have received support themselves; two-thirds agree with the statement that society's poor and those in need can be sure of receiving help. Presumably, most are thinking of institutional assistance provided through social welfare programs, as the situation pertaining to interpersonal relationships is seen much less favorably. For example, 74 percent believe that most people think only of themselves and not of others; 55 percent say that those who show consideration for others ultimately lose out; and almost 50 percent do not trust their fellow human beings. Here, too, the findings show that religious people have a more positive image both of others and of others' willingness to show solidarity.

The welfare state should reduce social inequality. For the vast majority of people in Germany (89 percent), families are the first source of assistance in an emergency. If they were in acute need of help, 79 percent would also turn to friends or neighbors – and not initially to the state. At 78 percent, a clear majority of respondents also see the state as having a responsibility for situations requiring substantial long-term protection against existential threats and for reducing social inequality. For 44 percent, faith-based communities are also important sources of assistance in emergencies and are preferable to government programs; in particular, people with a religious affiliation feel this is the case. However, a third of those with no religious affiliation also believe that faith-based communities are a better source of help than the state.

A majority say there are gaps when it comes to social justice. In liberal democracies, the degree to which people feel social gains are

fairly distributed is an indicator of social solidarity. This is an expression of how satisfied people are with solidarity-related social structures. Our findings, however, reveal enormous dissatisfaction here: 77 percent of people in Germany do not think that poverty is self-inflicted, while 74 percent believe that social inequality is unjust. Even more (84 percent) say the way economic gains are distributed in Germany is unfair.

Experiences of injustice and discrimination make it less likely that people will act in solidarity. The willingness to act in a way that supports the common good largely depends on the degree to which people believe society and its institutions are just and driven by solidarity. Multivariate analyses show that the readiness to act in solidarity declines when people have a more negative view of the state of solidarity in society. A prime example: People with little social trust are less likely to donate money. Among such individuals, only a slight majority (52 percent) would donate to charitable causes, compared to 74 percent of those with a high level of social trust. Also striking is the significantly lower level of social trust among the Muslim population. One contributing factor here is the experience of discrimination: The more often Muslims say they have been discriminated against, the less social trust they have. This suggests that society's efforts to overcome discrimination and promote acceptance and recognition among social groups can foster a willingness to stand in solidarity with others.

Compared internationally, Germans are very satisfied with the level of social solidarity in their country. A comparison of the European countries surveyed – Germany, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the UK – reveals a consensus that the welfare state should play a redistributive role in society. In terms of perceptions of how much solidarity exists, significant differences exist between the countries: While some two-thirds of respondents in Germany, the

Netherlands and Poland say they are generally satisfied with the state of solidarity in their country, this is true for only 40 percent of people in France. The figures for Spain and the UK lie in between. In the US, the results reflect a stronger preference for non-state-based social assistance that assigns greater responsibility to private initiatives. To that extent, 69 percent of people in the US believe that faith-based communities can do more to help in an emergency than government agencies can. It is worth noting that in the Netherlands – which has an even greater proportion of people with no religious affiliation than Germany – a majority of respondents say faith-based communities have an important role to play in providing emergency assistance.

Recommendations for enhancing religion's potential to promote solidarity in Germany

Our findings show that religions can put a stronger focus on the common good and build bridges between people. At a time when religion seems to be losing importance in Germany, targeted measures could enhance its potential for promoting social solidarity. Based on the Religion Monitor data, we can make the following recommendations:

Include religious communities and actors to a greater degree: In addition to genuinely religious offerings, religions provide informal structures for lending mutual assistance and support. Based on past experience and thanks to their national and international networks, they can also quickly activate resources for showing solidarity. Faith-based communities and actors and religiously affiliated organizations can therefore serve as catalysts and networking platforms for aid initiatives. As a result, actors at various policy levels, especially the local level, should consider and involve religions more as a key part of civil society when addressing societal challenges. This applies in particular to reli-

religious minorities whose commitment is often not seen or valued enough. Mistrust also plays a role here, as it erects significant barriers to interpersonal contact and exchange. Efforts at inclusion that provide sufficient possibilities for reducing social divisions and examining prejudices are thus best suited to leveraging the resources religion has at its disposal for promoting solidarity. At best, such efforts can also provide access to valuable intercultural skills and international contacts for aid initiatives.

Personal initiative counts – get others involved in the community: The less contact people have with a religion as they grow up, the more proactive religious communities and actors must be when getting involved in social projects and neighborhood initiatives and raising awareness of their charitable activities. If these activities are to have a greater impact, faith-based communities should make a concerted effort to open themselves and their initiatives to others. In doing so, they should consider three target groups: people of other faiths and those without a religion who also benefit from aid initiatives and who can be invited to participate in a meaningful way; other civil society actors and organizations who could serve as partners for cooperative projects; and policy makers and public administrators who can open doors and provide funding. Joint activities connect people across religions, strengthen mutual trust and understanding, and foster a sense of belonging. This not only increases their impact and the feeling of togetherness within local communities, it also boosts resilience on an individual and societal level.

Engage in interfaith partnerships: In many faith-based communities, especially those of religious minorities, when people get involved they volunteer their time without compensation to a much greater extent than is the case at Christian churches. As a result, these communities can quickly reach their limits, especially in times of crisis. In light of this, interfaith partnerships, such as

those that already exist in the area of refugee aid, can make it possible for smaller religious congregations to have a bigger impact when it comes to contributing their resources and promoting solidarity. The model of interfaith service partnerships has already been implemented successfully in several countries (Pipes and Ebaugh 2002). Such partnerships offer several advantages: Tasks can be spread across more shoulders, bridges can be built between participants, and specific immigration-related skills can be optimally deployed. Also helpful are platforms – such as councils and roundtables for faith-based groups at the local level – that facilitate interfaith dialogue and constructive cooperation between religious communities on an ongoing basis.³

Create a policy framework that promotes religious diversity: In Germany, the state and faith-based communities have a cooperative relationship and work closely together in many areas including social welfare programs. In contrast to one that utilizes secular systems, the German model evinces an appreciation of religion that is publicly visible and faith-based resources that promote solidarity. At the same time, historically and structurally, the primacy of the two major churches has characterized religion's place within Germany's legal code. That makes it more difficult for faith-based communities to gain equal access and actively participate if they are organized differently from the churches – Muslim congregations, for example. Making Germany's cooperative model more diverse would thus be one way of deriving greater benefit from the resources religious minorities have at their disposal to promote solidarity while also allowing them to play a greater role in German society. Policy makers should therefore work together with faith-based communities to develop the relevant practical solutions and adapt the country's legal framework.

³ See e.g. <https://www.bundeskongress-religionen.de/>

Increase the visibility of (inter-)faith initiatives contributing to the common good:

Media reports and the public debate on religious issues – especially Islam – often focus on problems. In a social environment in which ties to religious institutions are weakening (ElMenouar 2022), this can lead to mistrust of faith-based groups and religion in general. The present study shows that religion has considerable potential to strengthen social solidarity, a fact that deserves greater public recognition. The study also indicates that mistrust can weaken this potential, something that can be seen in Muslim respondents' experiences of discrimination, which

lead them to trust other members of society less. If positive examples such as (inter-)faith initiatives enjoyed greater visibility, it could result in more differentiated perceptions and help dissolve one-sided, negative images of religion. New, positive images could not only serve as a counterweight to the anti-democratic forces that instrumentalize existing prejudices, but could also strengthen cohesion in a highly diverse society. Here, it is also incumbent on Muslim congregations to become more open – through initiatives such as Open Mosque Day, for example – and to raise awareness of their efforts to contribute to the common good.

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