excerpt from:
Migration and Religion
Christian Transatlantic Missions, Islamic Migration to Germany
Edited by Barbara Becker-Cantarino
Amsterdam/New York, NY 2012. VI, 244 pp. (Chloe 46)
ISBN: 978-90-420-3536-2
http://www.rodopi.nl/senj.asp?BookId=CHLOE+46

Thomas Schmitt

MOSQUE DEBATES AS A SPACE-RELATED, INTERCULTURAL, AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

Abstract

The debate about a new mosque in Manhattan to be located near Ground Zero echoed around the world in 2010. Since the end of the 1980s, plans for new mosques have been highly contested in the western world. The main aim here is a comparison of different mosque conflicts, with a focus on German examples. “No mosque in our town!” is, with its variants, a common slogan of local neighbors and citizen action groups in Germany when a new mosque is to be built. So it is only a minor exaggeration to state: “No new mosque in Germany without a local conflict.” Also, since the late 1980s, inconspicuous mosques in Germany have been increasingly replaced by buildings that combine traditional elements of Islamic architecture (minarets, domes) with modern western and postmodern forms. This analysis differentiates at least three aspects of these conflicts: (1) spatial aspects, e.g., questions of town planning, but also the relevance of the built environment for personal and collective identity, (2) interethnic and intercultural aspects, e.g., the relation between the establishment and outsiders, and (3) interreligious aspects, e.g., the mutual conceptualizations of Islam and Christianity or relations between Islamic organizations and a “secular” state. It also considers how these conflicts escalated through the interaction of both structural and accidental factors, in particular: anti-Islamic discourses, social polarizations, and an accumulated potential for interethnic conflict in residential areas with a high number of migrants.

In 2010, plans to build a mosque in Manhattan made international headlines and became a leading topic in newspapers and news programs on radio and television. The message was that Muslims were planning to build an Islamic center in close proximity to Ground Zero. Protests were immediately heard. Ground Zero, the site in Manhattan where the Twin Towers were destroyed, serves more than any other place as a symbol of the global history of the past decade. The vehement protests in the U.S. against the construction of the mosque are, for one, a sign that mosque conflicts are always symbolic conflicts, and, second, that questions of spatial proximity can serve to

exacerbate such conflicts. In 2009, the referendum against minarets in Switzerland caused a stir all over Europe, and the same can be said of the consolidation of far-right political parties with anti-Islamic programs in the Netherlands, and to some extent also in Denmark. In recent years, a mosque project in the "cathedral city" of Cologne in Germany has given rise to street protests, public meetings and letters to the editor, yet in 2008, Germany's largest mosque to date opened in Duisburg amid public celebrations and a positive media fanfare.

About ten years ago, I conducted a study of mosque conflicts in different German cities.[1] This study adopted the perspective of conflict theory and attempted to integrate aspects of political geography and space-related conflict research,[2] investigations of intercultural conflict and violence[3] and research by scholars of religion. In what follows, I will present selected results, with reference in some cases to my earlier publications.[4]

In Germany, the debates relating to the mosque in Cologne-Ehrenfeld have aroused public interest beyond the local region in recent years. But during the 1990s, a number of mosque conflicts received publicity in the national media, in the big daily newspapers, in *Die Zeit*, in *Bild*, in *Der Spiegel*, and in daily television news reports. In 1997, even the American magazine *Time* reported on the bitter feud in Duisburg over a request made by two mosques for permission to use loudspeakers for the call to prayer.[5] At the

---

1 Thomas Schmitt: Moscheen in Deutschland. Konflikte um ihre Errichtung und Nutzung. Flensburg 2003 (= Forschungen zur deutschen Landeskunde Vol. 252). This study is available at: http://www.mmg.mpg.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Moscheen_in_Deutschland.pdf.

2 See Jürgen Oßenbrügge and Gerhard Sander: Zum Status der Politischen Geographie in einer unübersichtlichen Welt. In: Geographische Rundschau 46 (1994), pp. 676–83.

3 See, for example, Wilhelm Heitmeyer and Reimund Anhut: Bedrohte Stadtgesellschaft. Weinheim 2000.

4 See in particular, Thomas Schmitt: Umstrittene Orte. Debatten um Moscheen in Deutschland. In: Wohnen — Arbeit — Zuwanderung. Ed. Frank Meyer. Münster 2007, pp. 175-191. See also Sabine Kraft und Thomas Schmitt: Islamische Sakralbauten und Moscheekonflikte in Deutschland. In: Die alte Stadt 3 (2008), pp. 264–80. I am grateful to Sabine Kraft for allowing me to use my parts of the text here.

5 See Jordan Bonfante: No Rest in the Ruhr? In: Time Magazine, 24 February1997.

beginning of the 1990s in the small town of Bobingen near Augsburg (in southern Germany), the city council refused to grant a local Muslim community building permission for the construction of a minaret, arguing that it would be in violation of building codes. When reports of the conflict appeared in national media, this small town suddenly found itself confronted with an image of itself as a xenophobic, provincial Bavarian village.[6] No one at the time thought that, fifteen years later, much more ferocious debates over the building of mosques would flare up in Germany's big cities. If we compare the conflicts of the 1990s with more recent ones, we find that the arguments put forward by supporters and opponents of such projects have remained almost unchanged.

Why are current conflicts over the building of mosques so passionate, and why do they attract so much attention in the media? There is no single answer to this question; rather, the widespread escalation of mosque conflicts can be attributed to a bundle of different factors. Moreover, both supporters and, perhaps even more so, the declared opponents of building mosques come from very heterogeneous social, religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Opponents range from worried, middle-class residents of the neighborhoods implicated to neo-Nazi sympathizers. It seems that the high rates of escalation can be attributed to a combination of local concerns (on the part of both supporters and opponents), and the larger symbolic or representative function of the local conflict. Mosque conflicts are symbolic and symptomatic conflicts over the integration of immigrants and the status of Islam in Western societies. They are also conflicts about group recognition and hierarchy in the urban context. This local focus makes mosque conflicts different from other potential social conflicts relating to Islam, such as the question of whether Islam should be taught in German schools. Analytically, three different aspects of mosque conflicts can be distinguished: the space-related and urban development aspect, the ethnic and cultural aspect, and the religious aspect. Conflicts over the building of mosques derive much of their energy from the meeting and

---

[6] This is how national media reports were perceived in the local press; see Schwäbische Allgemeine Zeitung, 22 January 1993: “Jetzt liegt Bobingen sogar unter dem Meeresspiegel.”

overlapping of these distinct concerns, and these different aspects are interwoven in complex ways when the conflicts actually occur.

I *Space and Urban Development*

The monopolization of parking spaces during Ramadan, loud events at the mosque, noise from cars coming and going, and the muezzin call, which people assume will be audible in public: these commonly heard objections put forward by local residents belong in the category of space-related and urban development concerns. Here, people who live in close proximity to the planned mosque articulate their own particular space-related interests, and their desire to avoid disturbances and inconveniences of any kind. Comparable arguments are familiar from other space-related conflicts about the construction of buildings devoted to social, industrial, and commercial enterprises. It is possible to draw parallels between these mosque conflicts and the local ecology conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s, not only because of the procedural structures and forms of protest used by the mosque opponents (such as signature gathering, demonstrations), but also because of the way they express their underlying concerns, for instance, at public meetings. In addition to concerns about urban comfort, mosque opponents are driven by the fear that the area they live in will become "orientalized." A further argument is that the "foreign" architecture of the mosque is too different from local (or, in broader terms, Western) urban architecture, and will not fit into its surroundings and environment as required by the building code.

Cultural space arguments evoked in connection with mosque-related conflicts must be considered separately from fears of loss stemming from alteration to the familiar environment. People like to argue that in Germany, as part of the Christian West, a church tower and bells are allowed, but not a minaret and muezzin; the latter belong to the Islamic Orient. This a form of normative territorialization in which a normative significance is uncritically attributed to geographical constructs such as the "Orient" and the "West."[7] But

[7] See Benno Werlen: Sozialgeographie alltäglicher Regionalisierungen. Vol. 2: Globalisierung, Region und Regionalisierung. Stuttgart 1997 (= Erdkundliches Wissen 119).

references to an ostensibly permanent "order of things" that immobilizes cultural and geographical spaces which are only allegedly unalterable[8] cannot constitute a serious reason for refusing to allow the construction of a mosque.

The *supporters* of mosques also employ legal arguments. They refer, for instance, to the constitutional right to religious freedom, which must also be applied to the interpretation of building regulations. Representative mosques can be seen as an enrichment of the urban landscape, and they contribute to a more effective integration of Muslims. Speakers on behalf Muslim groups emphasize that, for them, the approval of representative mosques would be an overdue sign of recognition of the Muslim minority by the majority society. In this sense, describing conflicts over the construction of mosques as *recognition conflicts* or symptomatic expressions of the struggle for recognition of a marginalized group is justifiable.[9]

II *Religion-related Aspects*

At first glance, it would seem that religious aspects of the mosque conflicts could be subsumed under ethnic and cultural concerns. However, many lines of conflict implicating religious or theological issues, such as the evaluation of Islam from a Christian point of view, are to be found *within* Christian churches and German majority society, so that the terms "ethnic and cultural" in the usual sense can hardly be applied to these lines of conflict. On the other hand, some immigrants with biographically Muslim backgrounds have, in recent years, argued at a national level against the construction of new mosques, because they reject the dominant form of Islam.

Two religion-related arguments have a significant place in debates over the construction of mosques. One argument centers on the perceived relationship between the religion of Islam or Islamic

---

8 Herbert Popp: Theoretische Reflexionen zur sozialgeographischen Forschung im Islamischen Orient. In: Geographische Zeitschrift 3 (1999), pp. 133–136.

9 Thomas Schmitt: Moscheen in deutschen Städten. Konflikte um ihre Errichtung und Nutzung. In: Stadt und Region. 53. Deutscher Geographentag Leipzig. Tagungsbericht und wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen. Eds. Alois Mayr, Manfred Meurer, Joachim Vogt. Leipzig 2002, pp. 338–48.

organizations and a state seen as secular or a secular society.[10] The second argument concerns the relationship between the two religions of Islam and Christianity. Opponents of mosque associations claim that Islam is an anti-democratic, totalitarian religion (relationship 1), as well as being an anti-Christian religion (relationship 2). Christian supporters of the construction of mosques like to refer to the "brotherhood of the Abrahamic religions" of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (relationship 2), and to the basic right to freedom of religion, which includes the public use of religious symbols (relationship 1).

The relationship between Islam and Christianity has been full of tensions since the establishment of Islam in the seventh century, although traditional Islamic theology has in general painted a more positive picture of Christianity than can be said of the historically important Christian views of Islam. In the Lutheran Augsburg Confession of 1530, Islam was rejected as a false doctrine. But in addition to the "hard" readings, there are today more friendly conceptions of the reciprocal relationship between Christianity and Islam, or between the Islamic and the Western world; for example, the declaration by the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church speaks of Muslims "with esteem"[11] and emphasizes those things that the Islamic and Christian faiths have in common. On the other hand, traditional Islamic theologies can be an ideological obstacle preventing any serious dialogue between Muslims, and Jews, Christians, the followers of other religions, or even non-believers.

III *Functions and History of the Minaret as a Symbol*

Religion-related conflicts regularly involve discussions about the "correct" interpretation of religious symbols, such as headscarves or minarets. It is not uncommon for both Muslims and non-Muslims to argue that there is only one correct interpretation of such symbols. The headscarf can thus be a sign of self-determined religiosity (a

---

[10] On the pitfalls of the term secularity and different interpretations of secularity, see Heiner Bielefeldt: Muslime im säkularen Rechtsstaat. Vom Recht der Muslime zur Mitgestaltung der Gesellschaft. Bremen 1999.

[11] Nostra Aetate, Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, promulgated on 28 October 1965, by Pope Paul VI.

Muslim position), a sign of the oppression of women, or an expression of belonging to an extremist form of Islam (the classic argument of many non-Muslims). It is easy to overlook the fact that in the course of their history symbols can take on many different meanings, sometimes even contradictory meanings. This is clearly the case with regard to the history of the minaret, which I will examine more closely here because of its importance for the understanding of mosque conflicts.

The English word minaret is derived from the Arabic word *menara*, which originally referred to a lighthouse. A minaret (like practically any building or part of a building) can have different functions and take on different meanings; it is hard to draw a clear line between the functional and symbolic aspects of a building. Church towers and minarets both have an *acoustic function*. Since the seventh century, the muezzin has called the faithful to prayer from the elevated platform of the minaret, like bells in Christian church towers already did before this period. The shape of the minaret was inspired by the Christian church tower, but also by secular towers such as lighthouses.[12] The minaret has a *deictic function* when it is used to denote the place of prayer, and functions as *pars pro toto* for the mosque, or even for the religion of Islam in general. During the period when Islam was expanding, the minaret in the conquered lands was a kind of *victory tower* that symbolized the power of the new movement,[13] just as Christian church towers have at times had a similar function. In the Ottoman Empire, the number of minarets on a mosque was an indication of the rank of its donor. But these political meanings of the minaret are subordinate to its spiritual meaning: the minaret is an expression of the power of the faith.[14] In the course of the expansion of Islam, minarets took on a variety of external forms in different geographical regions. In the Maghreb and in Andalusian Spain, the square tower dominated, while narrow, round, pointed minarets were built in the Ottoman Empire. Besides these common

---

[12] Robert Hillenbrand: Manara, Manar. In: The Encyclopedia of Islam. New Edition. Leiden 1991, vol. 6, pp. 361-368.

[13] Annemarie Schimmel: Künstlerische Ausdrucksformen des Islams. In: Der Islam III. Ed. Ahmed Muniruddin Stuttgart 1990 (= Die Religionen der Menschheit 25,3).

[14] Michael von Brück: Gutachten über die theologische Bedeutung eines Minaretts für den muslimischen Glauben (unpublished report). Munich 1993.

shapes, there are many regional variations that give expression to different conceptions of architecture and art.

The meaning of a religious symbol varies depending on the social context, and on whether the meaning is derived from an internal or an external perspective. In the baroque and post-baroque European reception of oriental culture, the minaret was seen as a symbol of the attractive, elegant, exotic world of Islam. Today, it regularly appears on the title pages of Western magazines as a symbol of the fundamentalist threat posed by Islam, or of ethnic and cultural changes in the West as a consequence of Muslim immigration.

In mosque debates, Muslims who are first generation immigrants sometimes say that for them the minaret is a symbol of home: its familiar shape reminds them of their country of origin, of the places where they spent their childhoods. I have mentioned above that Muslims in Germany describe being allowed to build mosques with a minaret as an expression of social recognition and a sign of being granted equal rights. This desire for recognition is sometimes regarded as the expression of territorial ambitions on the part of the Muslims, and the conflict is thus interpreted as a conflict over dominance. It would be plausible to assume that some Muslims would subscribe to this symbolic meaning of the minaret, but in local conflicts this does not necessarily apply to the members of the local mosque association. Summing up the consideration of symbolic meanings of minarets, it can be concluded that intercultural conflicts may be aggravated when cultural symbols are interpreted from a one-sided perspective without recognizing that symbols can have complex, and sometimes even contradictory, meanings.

IV *Recent Developments in Mosque Conflicts*

There have been conflicts over the construction of mosques for more than a decade in many Western societies: Europe, the US, and also in Australia. If the arguments I have analyzed with respect to mosque conflicts in German cities, going back in some cases to the early 1990s, are compared with recent debates in Germany or Switzerland, it is obvious that there is a high degree of continuity. In a way, the public debates that have taken place since the September 11 attacks over the status of Islam in Western societies were anticipated by local

mosque conflicts of the 1990s. There are only slight changes to be observed in the arguments used. For example, whereas the opponents of mosques in the 1990s mainly referred to Iran when they wanted to demonstrate the inhuman side of Islam, in later debates it was rather the Taliban regime in Afghanistan or Sharia practices in Muslim states in Africa that provided them with ammunition. At the national level, the political culture in several countries of central Europe has seen the rise of far-right parties that have decidedly anti-Islamic views or even anti-Islamic programs. In a vicious circle, this tendency is fed by local mosque conflicts, or at least they serve to encourage it, while the local conflicts are then aggravated by it. In Germany, such parties have become established at the level of the states, for instance in the case of Pro NRW (a right wing group in North-Rhine Westphalia who is lobbying for an EU law to hold a referendum about minaret construction across the twenty-seven member bloc), but have not yet attained any noticeable foothold at the federal level. Threats from Islamic extremists are not simply fabrications, as recent experience has shown, and in some cases potential attackers have become radicalized politically and religiously when attending certain mosques. Supporters of the construction of mosques should therefore be careful not to deride the fears expressed by local residents. Rather, they should show how, and to what extent, the local mosque association is in conformity with the constitution, is willing to engage in a dialogue with non-Muslims, and is networked with other social groups and institutions in the area or the city. The example of a mosque inaugurated during 2008 in Duisburg shows that a new mosque can be supported by local institutions and civic organizations. In this case, lessons learned during the fierce disputes in Duisburg over a request for permission to use loudspeakers for the call to prayer obviously had a lasting effect.

V *Outlook*

Since the Middle Ages, German urban society has hardly been homogeneous with regard to religion, as exemplified by the medieval

synagogues in Cologne, Worms, or even Brandenburg an der Havel.[15] But only with the emancipation of the Jews in the nineteenth century were large, representative synagogues built alongside Christian churches. Around 1800, most synagogue buildings were hardly bigger than ordinary houses, but in the course of almost a century after the construction of the Dresden synagogue by Gottfried Semper in 1837, more and more synagogues were built. The architects followed the building styles of the period, from late baroque to classicism and historicism to the development of a special "Moorish" style that was intended to show the independent character of the Jewish faith in Christian Europe by deliberately using "foreign," oriental stylistic elements.[16] If in Germany today, an increasing number of non-Christian sacred buildings are being built — not only mosques but also synagogues and a small number of Hindu and Buddhist temples — this must be seen as an expression of normalization. After the forced homogenization of the religious cityscape during the Third Reich, when most synagogues were burned down, Germany is returning to the plurality of pre-war times.[17] For decades, people have accepted the ubiquitous commercialization of the European cityscape with very little criticism, while the religious symbol of the minaret meets with resistance. The Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung has suggested three fundamental steps for positively transforming social conflicts like the disputes over mosques.[18] First, it is important for both parties to examine their perceptions of each other and their images of themselves, and each party must try with empathy to identify the other's interests. Secondly, conflict transformation requires non-violent action, and, thirdly it requires creativity with regard to divergent goals, interests and contradictions. In processes connected with the planning and construction of mosques, creativity can indeed sometimes be observed. The state government of North Rhine-Westphalia, for instance, helped to finance the building of a

---

[15] See Helmut Eschwege: Die Synagoge in der deutschen Geschichte. Wiesbaden 1988 (orig. Dresden 1980).

[16] Nachum T. Gidal: Die Juden in Deutschland von der Römerzeit bis zur Weimarer Republik. Cologne orig. 1988, pp. 246–49, see also Helmut Eschwege (fn. 15).

[17] On this section, see Schmitt (fn. 4).

[18] Johan Galtung: Die andere Globalisierung. Perspektiven für eine zivilisierte Weltgesellschaft im 21. Jahrhundert. Münster 1998, p. 192.

social center that was integrated in the new Duisburg mosque. Because of this concept, developed by the mosque congregation in close cooperation with the city of Duisburg, the mosque project had an integrating effect on the local area. Today, the building has become a popular meeting place. Not from an architectonic point of view, but with respect to this function of social integration, the Duisburg project can serve as a model for other cities.