

From Object to Subject – Imams in Switzerland

Project Outline

This PhD thesis in sociology is embedded in an interdisciplinary project called «From Object to Subject: Social Science and Theological-Social Ethical Perspectives on Issues concerning Islam and Conflict». It aims to shed light on Islam-related conflicts in political and media-based public debates, focusing on debates on and with imams in Switzerland and their self-perception. In the same project, two PhD candidates concentrate on theological interpretations of conflicts by examining contemporary authors in Christian and Muslim traditions. Findings of the three PhD projects will be triangulated and brought together in a fourth project. Thus, three PhD candidates and several professors (in Interreligious Ethics, Sociology, Islamic Theology and Communication Science with a focus on Political Communication) take part in the project. Starting point for this PhD thesis is therefore an existing project description that was outlined for the purpose of funding the overall project. From a sociological point of view, however, it poses some difficulties that need to be addressed. As a result, the project is still missing clear research questions and a conclusive theoretical framework.

Research Idea

The project description envisages a three-stage research for this PhD. It intends to approach the question of the perception of imams in public debates in Switzerland and their self-perception on three levels: First by analyzing the political and, to some extent, the related media-based public discourse on imams. Hereby imams will probably first and foremost appear as objects in the discourse, i.e. something that is discussed. Therefore, the relevant research question for this part could be: How is «imam» in the political and the related media-based discourse in Switzerland constructed? Second, imams role in the broader media-based public discourse on Islam in Switzerland shall be examined. Drawing on the first part, it is expected that imams are partially viewed as experts on Islam and consulted as such, hence they appear not only as objects, but as subjects as well. Third, based on the findings of the first two parts and related to it, the self-perception of imams shall be explored through in-depth interviews. It is important to note that the thesis is not conceptualized to consist of three equal parts. Instead self-perception and perception by others should each constitute about half of the thesis.

Imams in Europe – State of Research

Discursive phenomena related to imams

There is a lot of research on public debates on Islam and Muslims in Europe,¹ but not specifically on debates on imams. The few studies that deal with discursive phenomena in relation to imams show very quickly that the imam discourse is a partial discourse of the larger discourse on Islam and Mus-

¹ For Switzerland: Schranz und Imhof (2002), Abdel Aziz (2005), Reichmuth (2006), Bonfadelli (2007), Ettinger und Udris (2009), Ettinger (2010), Ettinger und Imhof (2011), Parini, Ganni und Clavien (2012), Ettinger (2018). For Europe: Hafez (2002), Poole (2002), Poole und Richardson (2006), d'Hananens und Bink (2006), Spielhaus (2010), Halm (2013).

lims and cannot be thought independently of the former. Therefore important characteristics of the broader discourse on Islam shall be briefly dealt with here.

Drawing on the examples of the U.S., the UK and France, Robert M. Bosco (2014) examines the “securitization” of Islam after 9/11. By “securitization” he means the framing of a phenomenon as a threat, justifying extraordinary measures (Bosco 2014:6). Securitization theory holds what it “considers a ‘threat’, as well as what it considers worth protecting. Naming threats and referent objects helps bring *both* into being” (Bosco 2014:14). He shows that after 9/11 a new discourse emerges in the West that pictures Islam as divided in “moderate” and “radical” camps (Bosco 2014:42). “Moderate” Islam is becoming the referent object of national security discourses in the West in order to avoid the “clash of civilization”-framing. In the name of security “moderate” interpretations of Islam are promoted and alliances with religious actors formed (Bosco 2014:115–116). In contrast to other authors that perceive “securitization” as the securitization of Islam as a whole (e.g. Cesari 2009), Bosco stresses that what is framed as a threat is ultimately the diversity and openness of Islam to different interpretations (Bosco 2014:121).

Securitization as an overall discourse is evident in the discourse on imams, where a distinction between the “good” and the “bad” imam becomes visible (Boender 2004:36, Birt 2006:692, Kamp 2014:245, Lewis 2014:237). In the words of Birt (2006:687): “The good imam is now to embody civic virtues, interfaith tolerance, professional managerial and pastoral skills (...), work as an agent of national integration (...), and wage a jihad against extremism. By contrast, the bad imam has become an agent of divisive cultural and religious alterity to be deterred by multiplying bureaucratic hurdles, defamed, deported or imprisoned.” In other words, a dichotomy between the radical preacher and the imam as a key figure of integration in the fight against extremism is established (Schönfeld 2014:399). Besides the two-fold public image of the imam, it can be said at this point that there is relatively little research in which discourses on imams have been systematically investigated.

State attempts at political steering and control

The two sides of the public image of the imam are reflected in the two intertwined discourses: the discourse on integration and the discourse on radicalization. This results in state attempts to politically control and monitor imams. In addition to the surveillance and expulsion of “radical” imams (Kamp 2014:245, Lewis 2014:239, Peter 2014:243, Yazbeck Haddad und Balz 2008:215), there are other approaches. One possibility are the so called “consular imams” regulated by intergovernmental agreements. These are imams that are selected, sent and in some cases paid for by another state. This should ensure that these do not hold extremist views, but an Islam, which is in line with the interests of the (sending) states. It also allows the recipient state resort to diplomacy in the event of problems (Jouanneau 2013:271–272). Switzerland has such an agreement with the Turkish religious authority *Diyanet*, resulting in an average of approximately 35 imams sent from Turkey working in Switzerland (Schmid und Trucco 2018:6). Another possibility is the instrumentalisation of residence permits: Through an analysis of internal documents from various authorities of the French Ministry of the Interior, Solenne Jouanneau shows that by withdrawing the right of residence or issuing a temporary right of residence, the authorities are able to impose on foreign imams a certain interpretation of what the function of the imam in France should look like (Jouanneau 2009:166). Both the sending policy and

the instrumentalisation of residence permits are criticized for various reasons (Aslan, Akkılıç und Kolb 2015:323, Schönfeld 2014:402, Müller 2017:80).

Probably the most discussed proposal, which can be regarded as an attempt at steering and control (but can also be perceived differently), is the establishment of imam training and formation in Europe. Basically, two approaches can be distinguished, which depend on the model of religious law of the respective country. Countries which do not have theological faculties at state universities, as in the case of France due to *laïcité*, focus on a kind of civic education (Ferrari 2012:108–109, Messner 2013:23–24). Germany, on the other hand, began to establish institutes for Islamic theology at various universities in 2010/2011 (Schmid und Trucco 2018:24). Jan Felix Engelhardt (2017:327) observes that the establishment of Islamic theology is regarded both politically and socially as an instrument for the integration of Islam, which is based above all on the interest in taming the religion of Islam and the Muslim faith community. Interestingly, there is an example in Europe, where such programs have already been abandoned: the Netherlands. Starting in 2005, Islamic theology and a specific imam training program were established at three different universities in the Netherlands. All three no longer exist in this form today (Boender 2014:45, Peter 2018:34). A study interviewing stakeholders of the three programs gave the following reasons for abandoning them: lack of confidence in the motives of the Dutch government funding the programs and lack of confidence in the non-Muslim academics teaching the programs (Sözeri, Altinyelken und Volman 2018:6). In addition, Frank Peter (2018:345) considers the low salary in the field to be a basic problem, because it is in stark contrast to the considerable investment in education. He also believes that Islamic study programs in Europe are recognized only as second best compared to those in Muslim countries. Accordingly, significant obstacles to the establishment of imam training remain.

The changing role of imams in Europe and the question of authority

This area of research can give an idea of what might influence the self-perception of an imam alongside public debates. First of all, “imam” does not refer to a consecrated office, but to a function which theoretically every male Muslim with certain religious competences can fulfill (Ceylan 2010:26). The core tasks of an imam include leading the prayer, preaching the Friday sermon, teaching, performing rites at birth, marriage and death, and answering religious questions (Cekin 2004:248–250, Schmid 2007:26). Imams in Europe are often regarded as the equivalent of Christian priests or Jewish rabbis and, accordingly, as leaders or representatives of their community (Hashas, de Ruyter, Vindig and Hajji 2018:24). This is based on the observation that the scope of imam duties in Europe has expanded compared to Muslim countries, where the imam often plays a rather secondary role limited to religious practices (Frégosi 2004:137). However, it also has to do with state attempts to professionalize the function of the imam, which more often than not use the Christian model as the principal reference (Alicino 2018:364). In contrast to the rather monolithic picture that the analogy with a Christian priest draws, the figure of the imam is in reality characterized by a great diversity (Sèze 2013:91). This includes diverse educational backgrounds, as there is no standardized, formalized educational path sanctioned by an official institution (Hussain und Tuck 2014:2). In addition, there is a tension between volunteering and paid employment (Jouanneau 2013:12). The expansion and valorization of the role of the imam is connected, on the one hand, with the lack of other religious actors such as *ulema* (schol-

ars) or *muftis* (Islamic legal scholars) in Europe (Jouanneau 2013:13). On the other hand, the reinterpretation of the mosque in the context of migration plays an important role: While in Muslim countries membership of the religious community is primarily carried out through religious practices, in Europe the mosque association develops as a unique phenomenon (Cekin 2004:234, Tezcan 2009:122–124). Mosques turn into a social community centre (Schönig 2012:73, Sèze 2013:89–90). Accordingly, tasks of the imam now include advice on social issues, social work and, if he is understood as a representative of an organization, media relations, interreligious dialogue and communication with authorities (Müller 2017:76).

In the context of the rather weak institutionalization of Islam, the question of (Islamic) authority in the European context arises, particularly with regard to the imam. Frank Peter (2006) gives a good overview of studies dealing with the transformation and fragmentation of religious authority. Most of these studies emphasize the imam's loss of authority, criticize the state's fixation on this actor or refer to the appearance of new actors such as Muslim intellectuals. Furthermore, there is now some research that deals with the creation, maintenance and stabilization of authority through acting by the imam itself (e.g. Jouanneau 2012). Dominik Müller (2017), for example, studies the negotiation of authority in a Turkish mosque in Switzerland. He shows that the imam is questioned on a daily basis, constantly challenged in his authority and has to negotiate it by using his knowledge and pedagogical competences (Müller 2017:85). This finding refutes the persistent perspective in political and media debates to a certain extent that by virtue of their office the imams can exert an influence on the respective community and possess a certain authority over the practice and thinking of the community members (Müller 2017:68).

Theoretical frame: Difficulties

What becomes clear from the research idea is that at least half of the thesis is oriented towards discourse analysis that perceives reality as discursively constructed. A discourse does not represent external objects, but constitutes them (Keller 2011:46–47). The main difficulty that arises from the existing project description is how to bring together a discourse perspective and the conceptualized theoretical framework. The project description envisages a theoretical framework in Conflict Theory (*Konfliktsoziologie*) as a common denominator for all three PhD projects. It is based on an understanding of conflict in the tradition of Simmel (1992) and names a number of authors like Coser (1956), Dahrendorf (1972), Giegel (1998), Honneth (2003), Glasl (2010) and more. The concept of conflict as an essential form of socialization, which has not only destructive but also constructive effects (Stark 2005:85), might be compatible with a discourse-analytical perspective. But as Conflict Theory in the tradition of Simmel essentially focuses on relations between groups or individuals, the question of how to reconcile it with a discourse-analytical perspective remains.

The main questions that I would like to address in the presentation are therefore: Is there a possibility to bring these two perspectives together? Or would a possible solution be to treat the discourse-analytical part independently from the overall framework? Since I have not yet dealt in depth with Conflict Theory – the development of the theoretical framework is to be carried out jointly by all three PhD candidates and is planned as such –, which authors offer promising approaches to the research idea?

Time schedule and other relevant information

The overall project is financed for four years. The first year is dedicated to the state of research and the theoretical and methodical framework. For the first two parts of the PhD (political and related media-based discourse on imams; media-based discourse on Islam) six months are planned each for gathering, coding and analyzing the material. The following twelve months are scheduled for the third part (self-perception of imams), i.e. for its methodical framework building on the first year of analysis, for the interviews, coding and analyzing the material. The last year is intended for synthesizing and completing the thesis. It is important to note that for the gathering and coding of the material, there is an assistance of 25% financed for two years of this project.

Links to the thematic focus of PROWEL

Discourses on Islam and Islam-related topics can be perceived as social problems. The framework of the overall project within Conflict Theory (*Konfliktsoziologie*) further contributes to that. In addition, there is a theoretical closeness between discourse-analytical perspectives and conceptions of social problems (e.g. Schetsche 2013). I furthermore regard PROWEL as a very important methodological and theoretical environment, especially because of the interdisciplinary nature of the overall project.

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