

The appearance of Islam in Europe's regions

A cemetery project as a "window of learning" in terms of integration

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Integration Issues in Vorarlberg (Austria)

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**Presentation at NECE-Conference "Rethinking Citizenship Education in
European Migration Society"/26-28 April 2007, Lisbon/Portugal
WS 4: Religious Identities and Citizenship**

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The Project: A burial site for Muslims in Vorarlberg

An Islamic cemetery is due to be opened in Vorarlberg in 2008. Vorarlberg is a small province in the west of Austria on the Swiss border. It will be a denominational cemetery under Islamic responsibility and will be a region-wide facility available to Muslims from all over Vorarlberg. It has taken nearly three years to reach this stage.

The characteristics and results of this process

The characteristics and results of this process can be described on three levels:

- 1) The Islamic cemetery represents the establishment of a denominational cemetery for a new religious minority in a region with a homogeneous Catholic population for centuries. In spite of the current anti-Islamic mood in Europe, the establishment of this religious institution for Muslims who have come into the country over the last few decades has not been accompanied by negative debates or campaigns against it.
- 2) The responsible body is structured as a joint association of the different Islamic communities in the province. This covers different communities and ethnic groups, including both Sunnis and Alevis.
- 3) Autumn 2006 saw the breakthrough in the process with one of the 96 municipalities voluntary decision to provide land for the project and thereby become the site of a province-wide Islamic cemetery.

Context of project

A context is needed to identify the specific characteristics of an issue. This contextual analysis should provide information on the regional situation and

details of the particular project as well as determine those aspects that refer to a European development.

Let's start with point one: The, as yet, peaceful establishment of an Islamic cemetery as a central institution of a new religious minority in an overwhelmingly Catholic region – at a time when global events are indiscriminately reducing “Islam” to “Islamic fundamentalism”.

As in most German speaking countries, Islam came to Vorarlberg as the religion of the “guest-workers”. Today about 9% of the population is Muslim and roughly 2/3 of Vorarlberg’s Muslims are already Austrian citizens. So in 40 years they have grown to be the second biggest religious community in the province behind the Catholics (with about 78%) and way ahead of the Protestants (about 2%).

It was never imagined that the “guest-workers” would settle here in the long-term. The deceased used to be taken back to their home countries and their places of worship used to be, and still are to a great extent, so-called ‘courtyard Mosques’ housed mostly in old industrial buildings and former farmhouses. This meant that a learning process was needed on both sides to transform the “guest-worker” to a “stayer” and create an awareness that Islam turned into a religion of citizens and “locals”. In Vorarlberg, the Muslim cemetery project acted as a “window of learning” on the insight that the former guest workers are now “immigrants”, that the province has become more diverse in terms of culture and religion and will remain so, and that this new cultural and religious diversity will require new structures and arrangements on various levels.

The fact that this project became a successful “window of learning for the region”, in spite of the prevailing anti-Islamic background, is due to a number of factors. Firstly, this is certainly due to the value placed on the process by all those involved in it and the care and commitment in the way it was carried out. Secondly people seem to be somewhat more reluctant to oppose and campaign against cemetery issues and matters of death. And that was exactly why we saw the project as an opportunity to turn something that was primarily aimed at providing an important social service for a religious minority into a “window of learning” for the region in terms of integration policy.

On point 2: The cemetery will not be organised on a municipal basis. It will be run by an association representing all the Islamic religious communities, the various ethnic groups (Turks, Bosnians, Arabs etc.) and the different orientations such as Sunnis and Alevis. The question of the organisation of Islam, which does not have a central institution such as the Vatican for the Catholics, is an issue in all European countries. Europe’s Islamic minority suffers from being split up into antagonistic groups which in turn makes it difficult to act in unison and promote common interests.

Austria is an exception in Europe in this respect as it has an institution, the “Islamic Faith community in Austria” (IGGiÖ) which represents all the Muslims in the country. The IGGiÖ is structurally weak outside Vienna and also suffers from the problem that the majority of the Muslim population was initially unsure about recognising it as a representative body. Seen from this point of view, a particular feature of the Vorarlberg Cemetery Project, has been the swift and relatively peaceful establishment of a joint trusteeship of Muslims from all the communities, ethnic groups, and Islamic denominations which has made a great contribution to the project’s relatively quick success.

This formation of new representative organisations for democratic participation in the host nation is typical of the “naturalisation” of a religion in a new country. This is a process that is currently evident throughout Europe. The establishment of the “Muslim Council” in France in 2003 and the recent formation of the “Muslim Coordinating Council” in Germany in March 2007 can be taken as examples for such processes. While the old organisational structure of Islam back in the “guest worker” days reflected the divisions in the Muslims’ home countries, new structures have been set up to deal with questions and issues facing Muslims in the host country, that is their new home country. In Vorarlberg the moment of overcoming these strong, old divisions was the need of a ritually correct burial site: a matter for many Muslims beyond the powers of the organised Muslim associations in the province. Finding a solution to this problem also gained respect for the Islamic communities from the non-organised Muslims in the province.

Point 3: Vorarlberg comprises 96 municipalities. When the 2001 census was taken there were Muslim inhabitants in 93 of these 96 municipalities. Often there are just a few families but according to Austrian law they do have the right to a burial place in their local community and a funeral in accordance with their particular faith. Austrian local authorities have an obligation to provide all their residents with a burial place whether they are Austrian citizens or from abroad. Vorarlberg’s municipal cemeteries reflect the centuries long make up of the overwhelmingly Christian religious landscape. None of them have a separate Jewish section in contrast to the large cities in the rest of Austria. It would be impossible to integrate the Muslim graves as a new religious and non-Christian minority without making major changes to the existing cemeteries.

During the process it soon became clear that solutions at the level of individual local authorities would be less effective. However, the bigger cities were at first inclined to seek a solution for themselves as no one wanted to host a central Islamic cemetery for the whole province. But that would not have solved the problems of the large majority of the Islamic families living in the many small and medium-sized town and villages throughout the province. In this issue the general Europe wide anti-Islamic mood was clearly evident.

That we finally found a province-wide solution – a cemetery open for Muslims from all over the province – was based on a number of factors: 1) a general debate in Vorarlberg which favoured stronger cooperation between municipalities based on cost and efficiency grounds; 2) gaining the Vorarlberg Districts Association, a joint committee of all of Vorarlberg’s local authorities, as a strategic partner for the cemetery project and 3) the courageous voluntary decision of one of the 96 municipalities to become the site of a provincewide Islamic facility.

Project structure

The process started in 2002 with my exploratory discussions on setting up “okay.zusammen leben” as an information and advice centre for immigration and integration issues in Vorarlberg. “okay.zusammen leben” is an NGO, but we have been commissioned by the Vorarlberg state government to look after integration issues across the province. The structure of the organisation was oriented both towards the international debate on integration policies and towards the local and regional contexts. The latter, above all, seemed to us to be an important precondition for a regional integration strategy that could provide quick and effective results. I held more than a 100 discussions with various people relevant for Integration issues and politics in the province during the first months of 2002 to support this context centred development of the centre’s programmes. In these discussions several Muslim representatives of first and second generation economic migrants independently mentioned the establishment of a religiously suitable Islamic burial site as an important issue.

This issue then was one of several that “okay.zusammen leben” identified in these exploratory discussions and developed into a project idea. Where did we see the benefit of this project in terms of integration policy? As far as the majority society was concerned it was raising consciousness of the view that guest worker immigration was an immigration movement and that the state must permanently set out to make migrant integration part of a diverse religious and cultural landscape in Vorarlberg. For those Muslims and migrants who were, and are, poorly represented on political and democratic committees the project had the potential to help gain experience of decision making processes in the new country and get them used to taking part in such processes.

The project was set up as a process of gaining knowledge and experience in cooperation with experts and those people most affected on the one hand and as a process of the communication of this knowledge to ever-increasing circles of decision-makers and the public on the other. There were three milestones in this process:

- (1) An expert study on the organisation of Islam in Vorarlberg and the general knowledge base needed for an Islamic cemetery.”okay.zusammen leben” commissioned an expert to carry out the study. The Muslim communities were

involved in an advisory capacity. However, responsibility for the content of this study rested exclusively with the publisher, that is “okay. zusammen leben” and the author. I am phrasing it in this way since cooperation with Muslim communities was not without conflict in this phase. (On the Muslim side there was a need to get used to the rules of the knowledge society and “okay. zusammen leben” had learn to handle certain sensibilities in the Muslim communities.)

The first study was primarily aimed at the decision makers at the province and local authority levels and was intended to prepare them for the issue that Vorarlberg’s Muslims were about to bring before them. It then led to the official initiation of a process by the Vorarlberg Districts Association and the subsequent commissioning of “okay. zusammen leben” with the management of the process through a central political committee.

- (2) The second product of the process was a highly detailed proposal document from the Vorarlberg Districts Association dealing specifically with the establishment of an Islamic cemetery in Vorarlberg. This was drawn up at seven joint meetings of representatives of the Muslim communities and the Vorarlberg local authorities in cooperation with experts. This document was the result of a participation process of those most involved in the project: that is the Muslim communities and the Vorarlberg local authorities.

This proposal document then provided the basis for discussing the project at the local authority level: i.e. in the political committees of the Districts Association and numerous towns and cities throughout the province. Twelve months after the proposal document was presented and numerous presentations to local authority committees, one Vorarlberg municipality took the decision in the Autumn of 2006 to become the host authority for the Islamic cemetery.

- The third result was the compilation of the achievements of the process in the form of a handy brochure for the wider public. It continues to be used to advertise the project to the Vorarlberg population at numerous events held at local district level. Today, Muslim representatives who have become experts through their involvement in the project, are now promoting the project in lectures together with professionals throughout the province.

All the results have been presented to the public at the different stages of the project at public events and in the related media reports.

Summarizing the whole process one could describe it as follows: The phases of the process went from an initially very general expert study to a proposal document on implementing the project jointly produced by experts and those directly affected. And it drew in ever larger groups of decision makers and the public. It started with a self-commissioned approach to the issue by an experts NGO and covered the “voluntary” assumption of responsibility for the issue by the

Vorarlberg Districts Association to the “voluntary” decision of a district to become the host authority for the cemetery.

Decisive moments in the process

- The Muslim communities were persuaded to rely on the process and not on media agitation. They created a decisive organisational basis for the project by forming a joint campaign group that was able to overcome intra-religious disputes.
- The Vorarlberg Districts Association quickly accepted responsibility for the issue of the Muslim population as a central political committee on a “voluntary” basis without pressure from the media.
- As the largest religious community in the province, the Catholic Church , which enjoys a high degree of trust amongst wide sections of the population, proved to be an important and committed strategic partner for the project.
- “okay. zusammen leben” represented a project management and a sort of “protector of the process” that was well informed about both systems – the majority society and migrant communities – and that had the trust of all the participants. Maintaining this trust must be worked on continually, even in the form of giving up the “neutral” position from time to time to balance the process for one side or the other.
- During the process of gathering knowledge, new questions came up that only became evident when the results were communicated to the decision makers and the public. These new questions were taken up immediately and integrated in the process. For example, the first two documents contained hardly any information on the specific rituals of Muslim burials because “we“ (the experts) considered that to be of secondary importance and less relevant. When we then communicated the results to the local authorities it became clear that the question of (foreign and unknown) religious rituals elicited the most questions. So the relevant information was gathered and communicated.

Conclusions from this course of action

- It was the early intervention and the early creation of a “vehicle” for processing the issue that gave those interested mainly in finding an objective solution, overall control of the dynamics of the situation. We did not lose control to other interest groups like the media or populist politicians whose approaches do not always support mainly objective solutions.
- From the start, discussion of this subject was based on detailed information. Political decision makers who had to take a position on this in public were well

informed from the start which contributed to their expert handling of the issue. The approach of involving those most affected by the issue helped to create a pool of expert speakers which in turn raised the quality of public debate around this subject.

These first two factors and their contribution to an objective debate of issues which we – nolens volens – must discuss in a hyper-critical media framework, as is the case with Islam, must not be underestimated.

- A particularly important personal experience for me was the value of participatory approaches. The collaboration on a solution by local authority representatives and Muslim representatives, the joint effort to find formulations for the proposal document and the joint communication of the issue in political committees and in public created a basis of trust that goes far beyond gathering information and producing a solution for a specific issue

Cooperation on shared questions, issues and problems of the local community – this creates an essential glue for our democratic societies. The question is how representative are our democratic institutions? Which groups are represented in them and which are not? Muslims and migrants are scarcely represented in these institutions – not only in Vorarlberg but far beyond. Integration policy must not fail by addressing migrants exclusively as target groups in our social systems or as people who just passively receive welfare state benefits – from education to public health provision, irrespectively how important this aspect is from a social perspective. Working on the representative value of our democratic institutions, also in relation to the reality of our societies as countries of immigration, is an equally important task in terms of integration policy.

Details of the project and downloads of further information:
www.okay-line.at / Modul “Aktuelles”