

Muslim writers in Germany Today

Margaret Littler 20 July 2017

Islam in Germany

On 3 October 2010 the then President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Christian Wulff, gave a speech in Bremen as part of nationwide festivities marking 20 years since German unification in October 1990. His speech included the following statement:

First and foremost, we need to adopt a clear stance: an understanding that for Germany, belonging is not restricted to a passport, a family history, or a religion... Christianity doubtless belongs in Germany. Judaism doubtless belongs in Germany. That is our Judeo-Christian history. But by now, Islam also belongs in Germany.

Almost 50 years after the first Turkish 'guest workers' arrived in West Germany (1961) to fuel the post-war economic miracle, this was still a highly controversial statement.[1] In the same year German economist and politician Thilo Sarrazin published a polemical bestseller, *Deutschland schafft sich ab (Germany is Doing Away with Itself)*, warning of the consequences of Muslim immigration, and predicting that if current rates of immigration continued Germans would eventually become a minority in their own country, the churches would become museums and German culture would be lost for ever. But, as many have pointed out, Sarrazin's fantasy of a culturally homogeneous German nation is blind to centuries of German engagement with Islam, from the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant to the Romantics, from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to the German philologists and linguists who opened up Oriental languages and cultures to the world (Şenocak 2011, pp.32-33).

[1] For some detail on the debate see: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-world-from-berlin-integration-is-the-second-german-unification-a-721119.html>.

My talk will ask what we mean by 'Islam' in Germany, and propose that it is far from a monolithic entity, but rather a heterodox cultural and religious identity, important not only as a religious community, but also as an intellectual and a cultural tradition. As a scholar of contemporary German literature I am interested in the 'frayed edges' of national cultures, where they become porous and receptive to influences from outside. I am also interested in the ways in which cultural practices such as religion mutate in diaspora contexts, the emergence of Alevism in Germany at the end of the 1980s being a case in point. But first I will fill in a little historical background to the presence of Islam in Germany today.

At least since labour migration to West Germany in the 1960s and various waves of refugees since the 1970s, many Muslims have made Germany their home. It is now the largest minority religion, and well over a half of all Muslims in Germany are of Turkish origin (63%). In 2015 it was estimated that there were between 4.4 and 4.7 million Muslims in Germany (that is, between 5.4 and 5.7% of the population). Roughly half of these (2.6 million) are believed to be Sunnis, with the next largest group (c. 500,000) being Alevis. Alevis constitute a very large minority of Muslims in Turkey itself, estimated in 1989 at 20 million in a population of 55 million. Nevertheless Sunni Islam still dominates in Turkey, and a particularly homogeneous brand of Sunni Islam is promoted by the governing AKP party of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As of 2016, the Turkish government funds and provides

staff for 900 of Germany's roughly 3000 mosques run by DİTİB, the Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs. This means that formal religious education for Muslims in Germany is dominated by Sunni Islam [2].

[2] Interestingly the Directorate for Religious Affairs was set up by Atatürk in the 1920s to regulate the moderate practice of Islam as a private religion, as part of his secularising reforms. Since the return of political Islam in the form of the AKP party (since the role of the Directorate has been transformed, so that now it promotes the brand of Sunni Islam represented by Erdoğan's governing party.

Alevi in Germany

Like Alevi in Turkey, who have long been systematically oppressed, Alevi in Germany initially practised *takiya*, or dissimulation of their religious faith. This was relatively easy because Alevi don't observe the Islamic rules of sharia: they don't pray in mosques or fast in Ramadan, women don't cover their hair, and they don't go on pilgrimage. It is rather an individualistic faith that emphasises above all self-control as the foundation of social harmony (see the excellent ethnographic work Sökefeld 2008). In Germany Alevi were often mistaken for secular Turks and seen as models of integration (see Mandel 1989). In the 1980s context of West German debates about multiculturalism, however, an Alevi Culture Group was formed in Hamburg, and in October 1989 it celebrated 'Alevi Culture Week', which was the start of a social movement openly declaring Alevi identity and claiming freedom of conscience, opinion and religion.

In the 1990s Alevi in Germany started to commemorate openly massacres in Sivas and Gazi, Istanbul, where Alevi had been targeted as 'secularists' by attackers who went unpunished by the Turkish state. Thus a form of Alevi cultural memory emerged as a community-forming bond. They started to wear the gold *zülfiyar*, a traditional sword often found as a motif in jewellery, as a symbol of their Alevi identity. Also, given the importance of music and dance to Alevi devotional ritual (the *cem*), courses were set up to teach the playing of the *saz* and performing the ritual dance of *semah*. As Martin Sökefeld observes, in Germany the Alevi ceremony of *cem* has transformed somewhat into a 'performance' rather than an expression of (village) community cohesion, but it continues to be celebrated in Germany.

There is no consensus about the nature of Alevi identity in Germany. Some see it as a cultural or political rather than a religious identity; some see it as 'pure' Islam; others see it as not part of Islam at all; and some see 2002) it as a syncretic faith with Islam as only one source [3]. Nonetheless Alevi identity is an important part of German Islam, with roots in Anatolian mysticism that connect them with the writers to whom I will now turn. Many of the writers I find most interesting identify culturally as Muslims but are not themselves religious. What interests me is how very different their view of Islam is from dominant perceptions of Islam in Europe today. This has to do with their background in the Turkish Republic, which for much of the twentieth century was open to secular Western cultural and intellectual influences, while repressing the more mystical branches of Turkish Islam as 'backward' superstition. Religion was separated from the state and regulated by the state as a matter of personal faith. Today of course political Islam is back in Turkey, along with an alarming decline in the rule of law. But these writers are shaped by the ambivalence of Turkey's secular modernity and its repressed mystical traditions, in which they find a source of poetic and intellectual inspiration.

[3] Ruth Mandel (2008, p. 251) characterises Alevism as a 'mystical "Sufi" belief system, loosely sharing many tenets with Shi'ism'. See also Sökefeld 2008, pp.100-107.

Zafer Şenocak

Zafer Şenocak was born in Ankara in 1961, the son of a maths teacher mother and a journalist and publisher father. He arrived in Munich with his family in 1970 aged eight. His parents represented two faces of twentieth-century Turkey: progressive rationalism and conservative Islamic intellectualism. His father came to Germany not as an unskilled labourer but because his intellectual fascination with Islamic mysticism was then perceived as reactionary and in conflict with the secularism of the Turkish state. Şenocak began publishing poetry in German in the 1980s and is now a leading Turkish German writer and commentator on German multiculturalism. He describes his work as being founded in the ambivalence between the rational and the mystical, between physics and metaphysics. One of his early publications was a translation of poetry by the fourteenth-century Anatolian Sufi poet Yunus Emre and of Pir Sultan Abdal, the sixteenth-century Turkish folk poet revered by Alevis. His most recent book, written after the death of his father, is a very personal reflection on the appreciation of poetry that he and his father shared, and the religious faith that they didn't share (Şenocak 2016). One of his translators, Elisabeth Oehlkers Wright, says of Şenocak in an introduction to her translations of his poems that

to understand his work, one should probably have read or at least be a little familiar with the life of Mohammed or the tradition of Anatolian mysticism (Şenocak 2008, p.xx).

But here I want to focus on his essays from the early 1990s to the present, for their contribution to the public understanding of Islam.

In an early essay called 'Germany - home for Turks?' (1990) Şenocak argued that Islam is misrepresented in the modern world as a violent religion. For him it has always been a religion of tolerance, rooted in intellectual traditions dating back to the Turko-Persian Seljuk dynasty (eleventh to twelfth centuries) and Moorish Spain (eighth to fifteenth centuries):

The roots of Islam's tolerance lie in its history...in the everyday, lived history of a Moorish Spain, a Seljukian Anatolia. The time is long since upon us to take up and further that critical Enlightened spirit, which determined oriental thought from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, brought a high civilization to flower, and decisively influenced the European Middle Ages en route to modernity. (Şenocak 2000, p.8)

Şenocak picks this up again in an essay called 'The silence of Muslim culture' in 2001, in which he registers a devastating intellectual impoverishment of Muslim culture in the twentieth century. Its problem, in his eyes, is not its distance from Western cultures, but a lost contact with its own tradition. He sees moments of its legacy in the works of Orhan Pamuk and Salman Rushdie, but not the intellectual depth found in these Medieval scholars:

In contemporary Islamic culture there is almost nothing left of the influence of a sceptical thinker like Ibn Rushd, of the eroticism of the mystic Rumi, or the spiritual spheres of the Persian mystic of illumination, Suhrawardi. (Şenocak 2001, p.77)

Perhaps surprisingly he mentions sexual ambiguities as a productive legacy of Medieval Muslim culture - a tradition that he has sought to revive in his own writing, as a challenge to the dogmatic puritanism which is associated with Islam today:

Above all the erotic component of Islamic culture lies untouched where it was buried a couple of centuries ago. The tension between homosexuality and heterosexuality was

the true mainspring of intellectual renewal in the blossoming of Muslim culture from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries. (Şenocak 2001, p. 78)

He ends the essay by calling for a rediscovery of this Muslim cultural heritage 'in all its pious and heretical strands', that would be needed to bring about a Renaissance of Muslim culture.

In a still later essay written after 11 September 2001, 'Between the Qur'an and the Sex Pistols' (2006), Şenocak calls on Muslims to critically analyse the violence and hatred perpetrated in their name. He recalls his own struggle to make sense of the clash between his father's devotional life and the nihilism of punk rock in his youth, and explains that it was the fourteenth-century poet Yunus Emre whose writing consoled him. The poems of Yunus Emre

were testimony to the existence of individual voices in Muslim literature, beyond the dogmatic convictions and group dynamics, they described the loneliness and despair of the solitary soul...The boundaries between belief and unbelief and between the religions were porous, the gaze on the other was not clouded by the rhetoric of the self, it was rather an estranged view of the self. (Şenocak 2006, p.30)

It was as if a lived Muslim presence from his childhood had taken him by the hand and guided him through the chaos of the modern world. Emre provided an aesthetic and intellectual contact with Islam, when punk rock was urging him to break all the rules and question beliefs. And above all there was the beauty of Emre's language that enchanted him.

Emine Sevgi Özdamar

The poetic force of Anatolian Sufism is also central to the work of Emine Sevgi Özdamar. Born in Malatya in 1946, Özdamar is a successful actress, director, playwright and novelist who first came to West Berlin as a factory worker in 1965. Her motivation for being there was not economic, but a passion for the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, later to be realised when she settled in Germany in the 1970s and worked at the East Berlin *Volksbühne*, East Germany's most radical political theatre. Her first volume of prose, *Mother Tongue* (published 1990), begins with two connected short stories about a young Turkish woman in Berlin who reflects on her alienation from the Turkish language. Whether this loss of language is due to migration to Germany, her Leftist political opposition to the Turkish regime or to the replacement of the Arabic script with the Roman alphabet by Atatürk in 1928 is left ambiguously open. But the narrator decides to learn Arabic, in order to reconnect with the Ottoman Turkish of her grandparents' generation. She falls in love with her Arabic teacher, Ibni Abdullah, a love that is expressed in intoxicating love poetry with obvious sources in the Sufi ghazal tradition:

*You fine rose of my thoughts, You cheerful nightingale of my heart, I have seen you.
Your fiery mouth, The dimple in your cheeks, You have burned me. (Özdamar 1994,
p.32)*

The lovers exchange poetic expressions of their passion and eventually consummate their love, and for a while the narrator stays in Ibni Abdullah's flat, which is described as a small mosque, secluded behind a curtain while he teaches his students Arabic from the Qur'an. The Arabic letters morph into dramatic pictograms, distracting the young woman from the content of the holy text. The lovers eat mezzes and drink raki together, so Ibni Abdullah is

an ambiguous Muslim: simultaneously a scholar of the Qur'an (as seen in frequent quotations about hellfire and the damnation of unbelievers), a Sufi master initiating her into a mystical faith, and a Sufi lover, whose devotion is both for this woman and for God. This is clearly a heterodox form of Islamic poetry, emphasising love, not judgement, and intoxication, not discipline, as the protagonist pleads with her teacher:

Wine-giver, bring me wine, take my understanding away with the wine, it is not worth anything in this world, I want to be a wineglass moving between your hands, let my shadow fall only on your face. (Özdamar 1994, p.32, trans. adapted M.L.).

The repeated image of love as 'a light bird' indicates both the joy and the pain of a love withdrawn, as well as reinforcing the ghazal imagery of the rose and the nightingale:

Love is a light bird that alights gently any where, but takes flight heavily. (Özdamar 1994, p.42)

Eventually Ibni Abdullah withdraws from her, pleading for a 'spiritual love' because their physical passion is destroying his concentration and ability to teach the Arabic script. She responds that she cannot separate body and soul - 'when the body forgets, doesn't the soul forget also?' (Özdamar 1994, p.52) - just as in Sufism there is no absolute separation between the beloved and God. Throughout the love story she has sensed another Ibni Abdullah in her body, suggesting the key Sufi concept of *ma'rifa*, a form of unmediated, immediate and nondiscursive 'knowing' through which the mystical lover directly apprehends his/her beloved (see Ohlander 2011).

The protagonist's search for a connection with her Ottoman past leads her to a heterodox form of Anatolian mysticism with roots in an ambiguous and sensual poetic tradition, rather than a mainstream religious faith. Thus the various ways in which Islam is lived within Turkish communities in Germany, and the inspiration Islam offers to writers of Turkish origin, even those who do not profess a religious faith, presents a very different perspective on Islam from that popularised in the Western media, and one to which much more attention is due.

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