Does Ramadan Belong to Germany? (July 10, 2015)

Abstract

Germany's politicians like to make a public gesture by celebrating the breaking of the fast with Muslims during Ramadan. That's a good thing, says Raoul Löbbert, because religion needs hospitality. Löbbert is deputy editorial director of the ZEIT supplement *Christ & Welt*. Volker Resing, editor-in-chief of the *Herder-Korrespondenz*, which is published in Freiburg and Berlin, disagrees, warning that politics must not instrumentalize faith for its own ends.

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Why did she do that? Why did Angela Merkel celebrate the breaking of the Ramadan fast with Muslims at a reception in Berlin? Merkel does not fast. She is not a Muslim. The religious custom clearly served her as the means to an end. To be sure, she wished to make a confession of faith, but a political, not a religious one: "Islam belongs without a doubt to Germany." A short time thereafter her statement was quoted in the German media. It can easily be asserted that Merkel was instrumentalizing Ramadan and the spirituality on which it is based for her ideal of a diverse, tolerant, multi-religious Germany. But were the religious feelings of the fasting persons also marginalized in the process? Not really. In the end, no one tied the Muslims who publicly dined with Germany's politicians after sundown in the Ramadan weeks to their chairs. Mostly the Muslims were even very happy about so much instrumentalization. Unless, of course, meat that was not "halal" was set before them at the breaking of the fast in the North Rhine-Westphalian *Landtag*. In that case, the indignation was short but intense.

In the meantime, we have become so accustomed to associate insidiousness or devious motives with instrumentalization that the term has exclusively become a synonym for abuse. Abuse, however, implies force in combination with power. In contrast, instrumentalization means the use of a means to a particular end. Instrumentalization in itself is neither good nor bad. It belongs implicitly to the standard tools in the everyday business of politics. When, for example, Pope Francis patted the heads of North African children in Lampedusa, he was strictly speaking instrumentalizing the children's suffering to denounce the refugee policies of the European Union. However, not even his most extreme adversaries in the curia would hold that against him. How could they? The Lampedusa visit was a great gesture of sympathy for fellow human beings for the very reason that it was perfect staging and instrumentalization of humanitarian sympathy. The good end corresponded perfectly to the peace-loving character of the means. It is similar in the case of Angela Merkel and her presence at the breaking of the fast. Her ultimate purpose is clear: Merkel, the trained physicist, wants to make the power of the factual clear to the Germans. The fact is that there are four million Muslims in Germany. Many celebrate the fast month of Ramadan every year. Ergo, Ramadan belongs to us and with it, Islam—indeed, "without a doubt."

Of course, Merkel knows that doubts have been raised about "without a doubt" by more and more Germans since Pegida [Patriotic Europeans against Islamization of the Occident] and AfD [Alternative for Germany]. Islam, that is, the second message of her instrumentalization, may belong to us factually, on a daily basis or more, but it is not a matter of course. It is not up to the Muslims, who are prepared to peacefully fast and live in Germany, but up to the Germans, who are not prepared to respect the faith of the Muslims and regard it as related. According to a study of the Bertelsmann Foundation, fifty-seven percent of Germans currently consider Islam a threat. Sixty-one

percent are of the opinion that it does not fit into the Western world. Many people are afraid of Islamic terrorism. Rightfully so. But people like to ignore that terrorism intends to destroy precisely the relatedness in faith, fasting, and celebration that Angela Merkel invokes in breaking the fast and brings into being by invoking it. Critics see the high level of inter-religious conviviality as a betrayal of the Christian-Jewish tradition in Germany—a tradition that never existed in that way and that is only a construct. Many people use the construct to whitewash the Germans' relationship to Judaism, which is characterized by exclusion and annihilation attempts, and thus instrumentalize it for less noble ends.

The opposite of exclusion—the chancellor's breaking of the fast shows that—is a sometimes perhaps forced but nevertheless sincere effort to be hospitable. Admittedly, the end is not original and the means not perfidious. People eat and drink. That is all. Yet precisely this simplicity is so strong as a symbol that it could even have occurred to Pope Francis. To say nothing of Jesus, who did not let anyone tell him with whom to publicly break bread.

In 2013, Francis crafted a message of greeting to Muslims for the end of Ramadan, speaking of "appreciation and friendship." So far, Francis has not yet celebrated the end of the fasting period with the Muslims—or they with him. But that may be only a matter of time. The will to instrumentalize is present on both sides. Fortunately!

Politics must not instrumentalize faith for its ends
Contra

Fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam, the heart of the faith for 1.6 billion Muslims globally. For that reason, breaking the fast, or "iftar," does not belong to Germany, but to Islam. We must finally stop encroaching in the name of an ill-defined social coziness while showing no respect for the essence of religion. A secular society in particular must learn that. Christmas does not belong to Germany either; Christmas belongs to Christians. Naturally, there can be cultural interrelations and general adaptations, but they come later.

If Islam is supposed to also belong to Germany—the thought at least stands to reason with about four million Muslims in this country—that first demands a general and practiced respect for this religion that is still foreign to some. No adoption or currying favor. Respect demands that this other religion not be capitalized on from outside or used for other purposes or interests such as integration, peaceful coexistence, or interreligious dialogue. However, this is what happens when everywhere in Germany "on the occasion of Ramadan" fast-breaking ceremonies are held—by state or Christian organizations. There is often a kind of areligious "iftar-inflation" that is false at the very point when Islam is supposed to become an accepted norm in Germany.

Breaking the fast is a social event; that, too, belongs to Islamic tradition. It is reported from Muslim countries that, for example, Christians also invite their neighbors to iftar meals. Even the American President invites people [for that event] to the White House every year. So the federal government with Chancellor Angela Merkel also issued invitations to a "reception on the occasion of Ramadan." In her greeting, the invited State Minister for Integration, Aydan Özoguz, who is herself a Muslim, said that the event was not a religious act and that she herself had not fasted. Instead, it was a matter of a "sign of social solidarity." The fast month demands discipline and abstinence of the faithful; but it is also the time of open hearts and neighborly love, getting together with friends and family—and solidarity with the weak and the ill. The question arises whether the federal government, to promote solidarity and diversity in the country, will also soon issue invitations to Yom Kippur or Easter.

Isn't just the fact of singling out Ramadan already based on mental special treatment of Islam? In her speech, Aydan Özoguz also assured common condemnation of terrorism and exclusion. On the subject of Islam that

belongs to Germany, a rejection of international Islamism must immediately be formulated in a completely politically correct manner. That seems hardly imaginable any other way. But is this politicization of Ramadan dignified? That probably does not attest to a relaxed plurality. Muslims, Christians, and Jews spoke at the reception. Wouldn't it have been better if the federal chancellor had visited a mosque congregation instead and spoken there—rather than adopting the religious celebration herself? Barack Obama invites all the large world religions once a year to a unique, religiously charged reception. "In God we trust"—but that is a different tradition; nothing of that sort has existed in Germany before now. Do we want that?

The Jesuit priest Christian Troll introduced breaking the fast at the Catholic Academy in Berlin during the nineties. It was a hospitable act and in addition served to bring various Muslim movements to one table. The Academy still follows this concern for religious dialogue with great commitment. However, this year the Berlin Archdiocese itself issued invitations to come to the Academy in Ramadan "to very cordially break the fast." The diocese administrator Tobias Przytarski writes that it is wonderful that Ramadan brings people together; at a common breaking of the fast, "faith and life" can be celebrated. During the evening at the Academy, a prize is to be awarded; there is to be a presentation by an Islamic scholar; there will be a Koran recitation and grace before the meal by Przytarski. Perhaps it actually promotes mutual understanding when Christians and Muslims come together in this way. However, it is likewise possible that at such a mixed event neither one's own religion nor that of the other person is really taken seriously and respected. Then that would be encroachment, not dialogue. Wolfgang Huber calls that the danger of "*Selbstvergleichgültigung*," growing indifference to one's self.

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