

The dispute over building new mosques in Germany

There are about 3.5 million Muslims living in Germany. The German constitution allows the practice of every religion, which includes the right to build mosques. Legally seen, one can answer the question if Muslims are allowed to build mosques only with 'yes'. But why is it such a big political issue? The trigger for the public debate was the plan for a new, representative mosque in Cologne. For the first time, people began to talk about the problems of integration and their fear of a silent expansion of Islam. The conflict about building mosques became a debate on principles about integration and Islam in Europe.

To understand the dispute, one has to find out what mosques mean to Muslims. It is not only a place of prayer, but also a place of forming a political opinion. There are often rooms for social activities in the mosques and the building reminds Muslim immigrants of their home. Moreover, a mosque is a place to show the power of Islam in a Christian country like Germany.

The opponents of new mosques in Germany fear that mosques might not become a meeting place for different cultures but promote religious and cultural segregation. Moreover, there are often imams from Islamic countries who are not adequately prepared for the life in Germany. Another point to add is that the residents living near a mosque could be disturbed by the muezzin's call. But, according to German law, the call of the muezzin cannot be forbidden in any case. This practice is generally accepted by German Muslims. Some critics of mosques in Germany justify their reservation with general criticism of the Islamic religion. The suppression of women, intolerance and a rather distanced relationship to democracy are delicate aspects for them.

Furthermore, the associations that actually build many of the mosques are often under the control of the Turkish state, like "Ditib", the Turkish-Islamic immigrant association. This means that the Turkish state can be active on German territory and possibly try to pursue its own interests.

Most of these points apply to the planned 'Fati' (which means 'conquerer') Mosque in Cologne.

But there are also examples of successfully built mosques which are accepted by most Germans. One of these is often called "the Miracle of Marxloh" (Marxloh is a quarter of the German town of Duisburg). Though the architectural style is rather traditional and the "Ditib" is the client for whom it was built, the Merkez ("center") Mosque is a positive example of successful integration. The reasons are the emancipation of the local Ditib group from the Turkish-oriented head office, the renunciation of the muezzin's call, and the willingness of the Islamic community to enter discussion with residents and critics. In addition to that, Marxloh has been a multicultural quarter for a long time.

Generally spoken one can say that tolerance and critical faculties on both sides are necessary for a peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims.

Christians have to respect the Islamic religion just as Muslims living in Germany have to respect the German law.