

Spiritualizing reason, rationalizing spirit: Muslim public intellectuals in the German far right

Ethnicities

0(0) 1–23

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DOI: 10.1177/1468796820932443

journals.sagepub.com/home/etn**Julian Göppfarth**  and **Esra Özyürek**European Institute, London School of Economics and
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Abstract

Muslim, ex-Muslim as well as converted Muslim intellectuals are increasingly prominent figures in the West European far-right movement. By analysing their publications and online presence, we observe that concepts utilized by Muslim-background intellectuals popular in the German far right build on two seemingly contradictory tropes of German national identity—rationality and spirituality—and a civilizationism that oscillates between notions of rational liberalism and an illiberalism based on spiritualism. As these intellectuals combine the tropes of German nationhood and European civilisation, the far right builds connections with the growing Muslim demographic in Germany. The movement provides space for a variety of Muslim-background intellectuals: those who embrace a secular-liberal self-description emphasize how rationalism is synonymous with Germanness, while those who embrace a religious self-description critique liberal rationalism as lacking spirit. In so doing, Muslim public intellectuals help the far right to simultaneously spiritualize national reason and rationalize national spirit.

Keywords

Germany, Islam, far-right nationalism, Muslim intellectuals, spirituality, rationalism

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An increasing number of Muslims, ex-Muslims as well as white European converted Muslims are visibly present in the West European far right. In Germany, they appear not as mere fig leaves designed to paper over the movement's racist façade. Through highly visible public appearances, well-marketed books, and widely followed websites, they and their ideas have come to play an important role in the far-right movement and its discourse. Some of these intellectuals have openly embraced the far right or are part of established far-right networks. Others have no direct links to the far right, yet their writings and ideas have proven popular among parts of the far right. In this article, we explore the place, function, and reception of born, ex, and converted Muslim public intellectuals in the German far right, which we conceive of as a broad social movement that expands beyond party politics (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2019) to mobilize broader support (Caiani et al., 2012; Göppfarth, 2020a) for its white supremacist nativism (Mudde, 2007: 19).

Until recently, the West European far right's efforts to gain acceptance have been inhibited by its association with fascism (Art, 2018) and overt racism (Chin et al., 2009; El-Tayeb, 2011). More recently, the far right caught up with the newer trends of framing anti-Muslim racism in terms of irreconcilable cultural and religious differences (Özyürek, 2005; Shooman, 2014; Spielhaus, 2010). In doing so, parts of the movement have managed to hide their crude forms of biologist racism (Ruzza and Fella, 2009) in a language of culture (Wodak, 2013) and to transform itself into a self-styled defender of a liberal-rational European civilization of Judaeo-Christian values (Topolski, 2016) against an illiberal-spiritual Islam (Doerr, 2017) and civilizational decline (Jones, 2013).

To avert such a decline, far-right populist parties have assigned a central role to religion so as to construct 'the people' as a redemptive community that overcomes past failings and present polarisation (Marzouki and McDonnell, 2016). Blurring the boundaries between the secular and the religious, the rational and the spiritual, a 'secular, rational and modern people' is imagined as part of a superior secular European civilization rooted in a Judeo-Christian culture (Arato and Cohen, 2017: 288–291) and opposed to a Muslim other. The German far right is no exception to this trend. Yet, while parts of the movement embrace a rational-liberal 'Christianist secularism', other parts prefer a spiritual-illiberal civilizationism (Brubaker, 2017: 1193).

Without doubt, the increasing presence of Muslim-background public intellectuals and their ideas in the German far right is related to legitimization efforts in this broader discursive shift from the assertion of racialised biological to the racialisation of cultural differences in civilisationism. The movement has been successful in opening itself to new demographics, even those it aims to exclude. Shortly after Jews for AfD (Alternative for Germany) was established, a group of immigrants within AfD started New Germans for AfD (Deutsche Welle, 2019). The number of Muslim-background intellectuals popular in the movement has been growing. Not only do their names appear in manifestos and social media postings, as we show in this article, some of their books have also become influential

publications in far-right networks. Their public activism, be it online or at debates and readings, has become a central part in the different currents of the German far-right movement.

Racialized Muslim background intellectuals who serve, not the interests of their own communities but those who colonize or oppress them, have been conceptualised by Edward Said (2003) as ‘native informants’ and by Hamid Dabashi (2007) as ‘native informers’. Literary critic Graham Duncan (2002) named ethnic background culture producers in the West as ‘post-colonial exotics’ who market an authenticity they usually do not have. The intellectuals who we analyze here show some similarities to the native informants and informers discussed by Said and Dabashi in the sense that they claim an expertise that they do not necessarily have. On the one hand, this leads them to depicting themselves as first-hand victims of Islamic oppression (Shooman, 2014: 100) and embracing Germanness as a form of liberation. On the other hand, they depict themselves as seeing the true potential of Islam for a revived German nationalism. In both cases, these white and non-white Muslim background intellectuals claim to speak as insiders of Islam to legitimize policies that further oppress and regulate Muslims who do not fit the visions of Germanness they propose. In this way they thus also differ from native informants and informers because, rather than serve colonial/military projects outside the country, they help regulate the ways in which far-right as well as center-right nationalist movements draw the boundaries of the German nation. We suggest these intellectuals help the German far-right movement define its own limits, differentiate among different strands within the movement, and legitimate itself.

We observe that concepts utilized by Muslim-background intellectuals on or utilized by the far right build on two seemingly contradictory tropes of German national identity: rationality and spirituality. The positioning of Muslim-background intellectuals in relation to these tropes reflects the double-faced character of the German far right’s civilizationism, which oscillates between notions of rational liberalism and an illiberalism based on spiritualism. In both forms, European civilization and its rational or spiritual ‘people’ are ingrained as the essential ethno-culture with which Islam is viewed either as compatible or incompatible, idealized or demonized. We argue that, on the one hand, Muslim public intellectuals’ ability to rise in the movement depends on the connections they build between these seemingly contradictory tropes of German nationhood and European civilization. At the same time, the further expansion of the far right depends on its ability to establish connections with Muslims, a growing and increasingly visible demographic group in Germany. The movement provides space for a variety of Muslim-background intellectuals: those who embrace a secular-liberal self-description emphasize how rationalism is synonymous with Germanness; those who embrace a religious self-description critique liberal rationalism as lacking spirit. In so doing, Muslim public intellectuals help the far right to simultaneously spiritualize national reason and rationalize national spirit.

Rationality versus spirituality reconsidered

Since its founding in 2013, the AfD's initially dominant (ordo)liberalism has been complemented by illiberal currents (Göpffarth, 2017). While the (ordo)liberal trend imagines the German people as carriers of Western rational individualism, liberalism, and secularism, the illiberal current embraces a spiritual-communitarian notion of the nation. These two faces of the AfD specifically, and the German far right more generally, echo two senses of German self-understanding that are often seen as contradictory: Germanness-as-rationality and Germanness-as-spirituality. Both models have deep historical roots: the first is embedded in a rationalist-modernist liberalism with origins in the French Revolution (Breuilly, 1990); the second in a spiritual-traditionalist illiberalism formed in reaction to Napoleonic imperialism (Schulze, 1985) and early capitalism (Redding, 2011).

After Germany's defeat in the Second World War, German intellectuals and American occupiers established a direct link between the spiritual-illiberal tradition of nationalism and National Socialism (Mosse, 1966; Stern, 1975). They selectively embraced desirable elements of the German past such as the 'Weberian liberal tradition' (Kurlander, 2006: 2) and helped establish a democratic and socially inclusive West German liberalism as essentially distinct and in opposition to the exclusive ethnonational spiritual tradition (Forner, 2014: 6–10). East Germany was painted as a residue of pre-war irrationalism that had left spiritual notions of *Volk* (people) and *Heimat* (homeland) intact (Palmowski, 2009), combining them with the idea of class (Fulbrook, 1999) and socialist progress (Kolinsky and Van Der Will, 1998).

Although this reductive spiritual-rational dichotomy has become the ingrained political understanding of the purported nature of German nationalism, it veils the shared historical acceptance of both tropes among intellectuals along the entire political spectrum. Before the Second World War, the German left and right were heavily impacted by an anti-capitalist spiritualism: the left advocated communism, and the right a 'nostalgic and religious commitment to the pre-modern "organic" state' (Redding, 2011: 19). After the war, spiritualism underpinned the critique of liberalism in both the New Right and the New Left. The New Right expressed a desire for a nationalism that would go 'beyond left and right' and a need for the "'recovery of history" as the precondition of national self-confidence' (Müller, 2000: 214). The New Left embraced a neo-nationalism (Betz, 1988) that drew on postcolonial discourses that portrayed Germany as having been colonized by Western powers (Müller, 2000: 215). Both currents subscribed to the idea of an ethnically and culturally homogenous Germany viewed as under threat by a universalist order—capitalist imperialism for the left, multiculturalism for the right, technological progress for both.

But the opposition between progressive rationalist liberalism and regressive spiritual illiberalism has never been clear-cut. National Socialism went hand in hand with modern technology and rationalism (Herf, 1986a). German liberalism has a strongly racist and nationalist past (Langewiesche, 1999). Phenomena today associated with liberal rationalism, such as the *Bauhaus* movement, were

closely linked to racialist and spiritual conceptions of Germanness (Linse, 2017). Ordoliberalism, the post-WWII German tradition of social liberalism that sees state involvement as necessary to ensure that free markets work as they should, is strongly embedded in racialist thinking and the idea that Europe is the only true space for civilized democratic politics (Slobodian, 2019: 146–181).

Despite these overlaps, the Germanness-as-rationality trope has dominated the liberal nationalism of post-reunification Germany (Fuchs et al., 2011) based on pride in economic achievement, allegiance to the German Constitution (Habermas, 2005), the working through of the Nazi past (Wittlinger, 2008), and in distinction to East German (Berdahl, 1999; Glaeser, 2000; Kalmar and Shoshan, 2020) and Muslim ‘others’ portrayed as having not yet progressed to the stage of liberalism (Özyürek, 2019). More recently, both East and West German intellectuals have been drawing on anti-Muslim racist repertoires to discursively build a new, sanitised, post-reunification notion of Germanness. Based on the self-image of a progressive, enlightened and secular nation, this nation building has been aiming at redeeming and overcoming past guilt linked to the Holocaust as well as polarisations between an East and West German identity (Lewicki and Shooman, 2019).

The figure of German-as-rational and hence secular appeared in opposition to the figure of the regressive and illiberal Muslim. As Schirin Amir-Moazami argues, this secular model of nationhood accepts the spiritual and religious only as a private affair and as an object of individual choice rather than of a collective national identity displayed in public (Amir-Moazami, 2016: 156). In this framework, the public display of emotions as well as formulation of religious and spiritual claims need to be clad in a secular and rational vocabulary and not challenge the primacy of secular reasoning. The naturalised character of the rationality-trope, in opposition to a regressive spiritual other veils the Christian legacy it is built on (Asad, 1993). The intellectuals we analyze here either reassert or challenge the rational-liberal trope. Those who assert it draw on the unmarked religious legacy of secularism and spiritualize a rational understanding of nationhood. Those intellectuals who challenge the rational-liberal trope, on the other hand, go against the idea of rational-liberal nationhood call for a collective spirituality either through the reassertion of an explicitly Christian nationhood or the fusion of a collective spiritual Germanness with Islam. Despite following different tropes of Germanness, both groups share the quest for a redemptive and purified vision of Germanness that overcomes past divisions, feelings of guilt, and present polarisation.

Muslim-background intellectuals and the German far right

The Muslim-background intellectuals we analyze in this article either have established direct links to the far right or have become figures of reference in the far right. They are of Turkish, Kurdish, Arab (Egyptian, Palestinian, Lebanese), Pakistani, Macedonian, Iranian, Albanian, and German backgrounds. They are men and women, young and old, atheist and devout believer; recent immigrants,

second or third generation, and native; lawyers, social workers, psychologists, university professors, authors, and publicists; on the left, centre, and right ends of the political spectrum. They have differing but equally strong opinions about what the fundamentals of German identity are, and what kinds of Islam and Muslims do, and do not, suit it. The intellectuals and/or the ideas used by these intellectuals build on the ingrained rationalist and spiritualist tropes of German identity and help to make themselves more visible within the movement and/or to mobilize broader legitimacy and support for it. The inherent ambiguities and entanglements of the two competing tropes of Germanness-as-rationality and Germanness-as-spirituality allow these seemingly marginal intellectuals to simultaneously speak to both the illiberalism *and* the liberalism that are active on the far right. The quick solutions they provide to the German Muslim question open up new, and often radical, ideas about folding certain kinds of Muslims or Islam into the German nation while excluding other kinds. Their presence on the far right and their rejection of Islam serves to legitimate the movement's racist discourses and practices.

In what follows, we analyze the writings of 14 Muslim-background intellectuals who are either active protagonists of the German far right or whose ideas have been picked up by it. We chose these individuals for two reasons: 1) their presence at sponsored events, their contributions to far-right publications, and their influential websites and channels make them currently the most visible Muslim-background intellectuals in the movement; and 2) they represent a variety of positions currently visible in the movement.

Our most important insights build on ethnographic field research conducted separately among German converts to Islam (Özyürek, 2009, 2014) and German far-right intellectual circles (Göpffarth, 2020a, 2020b). Yet, for this article we also systematically analyzed the public writings of all Muslim background, ex-Muslim, or converted Muslim public intellectuals that appear in an emerging network of far-right websites and platforms, publishing houses, think tanks and broader networks (Göpffarth, 2020b). We looked at online and print publications such as *Compact*, *Tumult*, *Sezession*, *Junge Freiheit*, *Tichy's Einblick*, *Achse des Guten*, *Epoch Times* as well as social media posts by regional and national AfD actors and networks. We also analyzed publications promoted or published by known far-right publishers such as *Manuscriptum* and *Antaios*. We were able to locate 14 such intellectuals. It is likely that there are many more such public figures that are influential in local settings but do not reach larger audiences.

We read all the publicly available writings, listened to recorded interviews, and browsed Twitter posts of all the intellectuals we were able to identify. We were able to do this comprehensive research based on the entire sample due to the relatively small number of the intellectuals we were able to identify. We made several attempts to categorize their approaches to German nationalism. We finally settled on a four-celled chart that located them on the axis of their closeness to Germanness-as-rationality and Germanness-as-spirituality and whether they see Islam and Germanness as compatible. As we discuss in the article, the boundaries

among the cells are not very clearly defined and some statements of the public figures can be located in another cell of the chart as well. However, when looking at the totality of the statements of each individual, we were able to confidently locate them in one of the four cells of our chart.

Through their prominent positions or the popularity of their ideas in the movement, their ideas actively shape the notions of Germanness the far right draws on to mobilise broader support. We identify four distinct networks of Muslim-background intellectuals who use the tropes of spiritualism or rationalism to imagine a German nation/European civilization. In the first two networks we look at how Seyran Ateş, Ahmad Mansour, Zana Ramadani, Necla Kelek, and Hamed Abdel-Samad draw on the Germanness-as-spirituality trope to claim the incompatibility or compatibility of Islam with a hegemonic liberal notion of Germanness. In the last two networks we analyze how Abu-Bakr Rieger, Muhesir Sebastian Hennig, Eren Güvercin, Feridun Zaimoğlu, Sabatina James, Feroz Khan, and Akif Pirinçci mobilise the Germanness-as-spirituality trope to either include or exclude Islam in a sanitised vision of illiberal German identity.

Germanness-as-rationality

A significant number of Muslim-background public intellectuals depict a stark civilizational opposition between the West and the East, portraying Germany as the embodiment of rational Western modernity and Islam as the expression of an Eastern irrational barbarity. Intellectuals such as Seyran Ateş, Ahmad Mansour, Zana Ramadani, Necla Kelek, and Hamed Abdel-Samad embrace mainstream narratives of a liberal and rational German nationhood representative of a West European rationalism. In their books, they combine autobiography and accounts of their individual paths to a rational liberalism with subjective analysis of Muslim culture (Abdel-Samad, 2010; Ateş, 2006; Kelek, 2005; Ramadani, 2017) and subscribe to the Germanness-as-rationalism trope to demonstrate how Muslims can leave their irrational culture and religion behind and embrace a rational German identity. They emphasize the differences between Islamic and Western/German lifestyles and argue that Muslims can embrace Western values and customs as individuals either by radically transforming Islam or by leaving it behind altogether.

Muslim-background intellectuals in this category are highly visible in mainstream media and are granted prestigious awards or invited to the Islam Conference.¹ They are given influential advisory positions in government relating to immigrants and Muslims. Their views resonate with the newer post-racist, rationalist, civilizationist trends popular in the German far-right conservative parts of the centre-right Christian Democratic Union, but also with liberal and left critics of Islam and immigration, including parts of the Liberal Democrats and the Left Party's *Aufstehen* movement.

Although those who see Germanness as a fundamentally liberal, democratic, and rational identity concur that contemporary Muslim practices are irreconcilable

with German identity, the first conciliatory network we analyze argues that Islam can be radically reformed to fit into the fold of the rational German nation if Muslims emulate Germany's historical progression from illiberal irrationalism to liberal rationalism. In contrast, the second network claims that to be integrated into Germany, Muslims must leave Islam behind. In both cases, the changes required from Islam and Muslims are so radical that it is unrealistic to expect large numbers of Muslims to meet their criteria.

Network one: Islam and Germanness are compatible

Intellectuals such as Seyran Ateş and Ahmad Mansour explicitly describe themselves as Muslims and promote a radical reform of Islam. They both have a background in the German New Left and have the weakest ties to the far right. While they do not openly embrace the movement and may at times publicly criticize it, they do participate in far-right events and are highly popular points of reference in the movement. Their primary argument is that Muslim and German identities are compatible if Muslims radically reform their belief system and adapt their ways to suit a superior German rationality. They see themselves not only as liberal but also *liberated* Muslims whose individual life stories demonstrate that Muslims can be assimilated into German identity on condition that they leave their families, culture, and fundamentals of belief behind. They promote the idea that Germanness is something that can be adopted by retracing the historical steps Germans have tread; for example, through the 1968 sexual revolution (Ateş, 2011; Mansour, 2014) or the Christian reformation (Ramadani, 2017).

Seyran Ateş, a Turkish-background lawyer formerly on the radical left who fights for immigrant women's rights, is the most visible member of this network. With the encouragement of the former minister of interior affairs, Wolfgang Schäuble, she recently established the reformed, gender-neutral Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque in Berlin, declaring herself an imam (Ateş, 2017c). She has since been under attack by conservative Muslims and highly appreciated and supported by the German far right as a model for German Islam (AfD Potsdam, 2017; Breitbart London, 2017). She was publicly invited to join the AfD (Breyton, 2018). In the *Gemeinsame Erklärung 2018* declaration, where far-right public intellectuals like Thilo Sarrazin positioned themselves against an 'illegal mass immigration', Ateş was named as a preferred choice for a commission to restore 'lawful order at the borders' (Fetscher, 2018). Despite distancing herself from the AfD (Ateş, 2017a), she supports the party's stance on limiting immigration and Islamization (Ateş, 2017b) and, together with ex-FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache, participated in an event organized by the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) about the threat of political Islam (FPÖ, 2018).

Ahmad Mansour is a Palestinian-background Israeli who migrated to Germany in 2006 to finish his studies in psychology. Mansour became well known through affiliation with political education projects that trained young male Muslims on gender equality, anti-Semitism, and radicalization prevention (Özyürek, 2019).

Affiliated with the Green Party, he wrote several op-eds with its Turkish-background leader, Cem Özdemir. Despite his formal disengagement, Mansour is highly appreciated by the far right, is presented as a champion in the fight against anti-Semitism and Islamism (Masson, 2018; Werner, 2018) and has participated in debates with prominent far-right public intellectuals (Leh, 2019).

The third public intellectual in this network is Zana Ramadani, an Albanian-background lawyer and Christian Democratic Union politician whose parents arrived in Germany as Yugoslav refugees when she was young (Ramadani, 2017). As one of the founders of the German branch of the Ukrainian radical feminist group, Femen, known for their topless protests against religious institutions, sexism, and homophobia, Ramadani now regularly contributes to German far-right blogs such as *Die Achse des Guten* (Ramadani, 2017).

Both Mansour and Ateş present themselves as Muslims, and Ramadani as an atheist, but all three promote the idea that, through radical reform, Islam and Muslims can become an integral part of a rational and secular German society. Their books and the declarations they have co-signed alongside other secular or humanistic Muslims—the Berlin Declaration of the Muslim Forum spearheaded by Ahmad Mansour and the Freiburg Declaration of Secular Muslims—describe how Islam is to be reformed: Muslims should not take the *Quran* as the word of God but rather as a historical document; accept the equality of genders; deny violence; stand against anti-Semitism, homophobia, and hatred of the West; publicly declare that they submit to the German Constitution (Freiburger Deklaration, 2016). In her Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque, Ateş has abolished gender segregation, discourages women from covering their hair, and bans burqa-wearing (Samuels, 2017).

Common to the recommendations of reformist Muslim intellectuals in this network is the belief that German identity can be adopted if Muslims emulate the historical progression of German society. Ateş and Mansour believe that, to be liberated and to overcome a sexually repressed, patriarchal, and authoritarian Muslim identity that is in direct opposition to German democratic culture, Muslims must repeat the 1968 German sexual revolution for themselves. In their view, obedience to parents, gender segregation, and bans on premarital sex prevent Muslims from becoming mature citizens ready for democracy (Ateş, 2011: 87) and drive them towards Islamist radicalization (Mansour, 2014: 129). Ramadani goes so far as to suggest that Muslim immigrants and refugees should repeat the steps of German reformers of the 15th century and unreservedly reform their faith (Ramadani, 2017: 247).

Another idea promoted by this network is that Germans have overcome their Nazi past and should simply stop feeling guilty about it (Ewing, 2008; Yıldız, 2011). Concentrating on past guilt drives Germans to apply ‘false tolerance’ (Ateş, 2019; Ramadani, 2017) towards minorities and especially Muslims. Such a vision sits well with the German far right’s calls to move on from guilt and build national confidence instead. It idealizes and sacralizes German history, presenting it as the ultimate expression of progress that other groups should repeat.

Embracing such a trope enables the German far right to present itself as a liberal and secular movement that does not exclude people based on race, thereby generating support within both the right-liberal and left-liberal mainstream. Following the European far right's broader civilizational shift, it rebrands the German far right as a defender of a redemptive rational-liberal nation and a European civilization based not on essentialised racial but cultural differences.

Network two: Islam and Germanness are incompatible

The second network of Muslim-background intellectuals we analyze also promotes the idea that a Western civilization-based German identity is superior to Islam. What differentiates the second network from the first is its harsher interpretation of the clash-of-civilizations perspective and the view that Islam and the West are at war. Protagonists of this network such as Necla Kelek, Hamed Abdel-Samad, and Imrad Karim aim to have left Islam behind and indicate their individually chosen paths as the only ones available for Muslims to become German. They openly embrace the AfD, have appeared in print alongside central figures of the German far right's liberal-civilizationist current such as Thilo Sarrazin and Birgit Kelle (Plickert, 2017), and have published their own bestselling books (Abdel-Samad, 2010; Kelek, 2005). These intellectuals regularly participate in far-right events, contribute to the far-right media, and are actively utilized by the AfD as sources to legitimize policy choices on immigration (AfD NRW, 2017; Petry, 2017).

Turkish-background sociologist Necla Kelek is the leading public intellectual in this network. In her bestselling books *The Foreign Bride* (Kelek 2005) and *The Lost Sons* (Kelek 2006), Kelek positions herself as an insider to Turkish/Muslim culture and promotes the idea that the differences separating Europe and Islam are unbridgeable. She claims that Islam is not a belief-system but is a declaration of war on European civilization (Kelek and Horn, 2010). Manifestations of Islam such as headscarves or mosques are therefore not aspects of religious freedom but symbols of invasion. If Muslims are to be integrated into German society, they must leave Islam behind, one-by-one, and fully commit to German society: 'An individual Muslim can be integrated into German society. Islam cannot' (European Stability Initiative, 2010: 8). The notion of individual choice and allegiance to a collectively shared notion of liberalism in contrast with an essentially collectivist Islam is central to her narrative.

Egyptian-background political scientist Hamed Abdel-Samad concurs with Kelek that Islam is not a religion but a political ideology, going so far as to claim that Islam is the original fascist ideology. In his international best seller, *Islamic Fascism*, Abdel-Samad argues that the Muslim Brothers are ideological and historical precursors to Nazism in that, far from having learned fascism from the Germans, Muslims had in fact invented it themselves in 632 after the death of Muhammad (Abdel-Samad, 2016). His conclusion is that Islam and Europe are irreconcilable because Islam is not reformable. Imrad Karim, a Lebanese-background filmmaker and official AfD member, argues that

Germany ‘cannot and should not’ integrate immigrants because Muslims have always been violent, aim to Islamize the whole world, and threaten the path of progress Germany has taken since the Second World War (Karim, 2018). Both intellectuals’ ideas are in line with the far-right struggle to free German identity from fascism and to externalize it onto Islam. Fascism is here the symbol for an illiberal collectivist past that contemporary Germany is deemed to have overcome.

As rationalists, members of this network do not define themselves as Muslim, and some openly declare their break with Islam.² In contrast with most atheists, however, they emphasize Christianity’s superiority to Islam and its role as the basis of German/European civilization. For Necla Kelek, the problem with Islam is that its intrinsic authoritarianism is directly opposed to Christianity’s message of ‘love and hope’ (Kelek, 2006: 22). Although these intellectuals invoke the trope of a secular European civilization under threat by an illiberal and fascist Islam, Kelek’s (and Ramadani’s) references to Christianity reveal the centrality of a secularized Christian identity that appeals to the far right’s civilizationalist approach. Kelek’s reference to ‘love’ and ‘hope’ reveals how discourses of passion and affect can underpin secular notions of individual freedom (Asad, 2006). Spiritual claims are acceptable if they are clad in a vocabulary of individual liberalism.

Both networks one and two define Germanness as rationality and foreground the idea of a secular-liberal civilization. But they blur the rational and spiritual arguments by sacralizing a German identity based on reason and an individual path towards liberation from an oppressive collective. They make use of quasi-religious narratives of redemption by arguing that becoming German means embracing Western so-called civilizational and liberal values. In this narrative, becoming Germany requires either Islam’s complete reform or its complete repudiation. In this process, the Christian (Protestant) legacy of the trope of rationality and its vision of an individualized and privatised spirituality becomes apparent. The demonisation of collective forms of spirituality here goes hand in hand with the elevation of a secular nationhood to an abstract norm based on which individual religious claims must be clad in a vocabulary of rationality.

Germanness-as-spirituality

The next two networks of Muslim-background intellectuals we analyze define Germanness as a spiritual concept. Compared to the first two networks, they are less visible both in the mainstream and on the far right itself. Nevertheless, they have gained increasing visibility and influence in those far-right elite circles that support more collectivist notions of nationhood. They speak to those far-right networks that oppose liberal rationalism and individualism and that are critical of the far right’s recent liberal-civilizationist shift. Contrary to the first two networks who idealize rationalism as the root of German identity, the third and fourth networks perceive rationalism as a serious ‘threat to European civilization’ in that it empties the continent of its ‘Christian spirit’ and leaves it faithless. Unlike the first two networks, which embrace a secular and individualist approach to life

and religion, the last two attribute wider powers to religion and see it as a collectively shared source of resistance to globalization, capitalism, and liberalism, which deprive the 'European way of life' of its meaning. While network three sees Islam as an opportunity to mobilize a nationally rooted resistance culture, network four sees Islam as a threat that thrives on Europe's spiritual void. All four networks aim at a symbolically essentialised, sanitised and idealised national identity. Yet they differ in their visions on what forms the essence of this nationhood. Networks one and two see the integration into Germanness as an individually performed and chosen path to an essential secular-rational norm that veils yet simultaneously reifies its Christian legacy. Networks three and four see spirituality as a legacy that is not a matter of choice but a pre-given tradition that has to be revived, defended and asserted as part of a collective identity.

Network three: Islam and Germanness are compatible

Muslim intellectuals such as Abu-Bakr Rieger, Muhesir Sebastian Hennig, Eren Güvercin, and Feridun Zaimoğlu occupy a small, but increasingly discussed, niche in the German far right which promotes the view that the spiritual potential of Islam can further a spiritual sense of Germanness. While some of them have (or have had) direct links to the far right (Rieger, Hennig) others (Güvercin, Zaimoğlu) have seen their ideas being picked up by influential far-right intellectuals. Affiliated largely with the Al-Murabitun movement³ and organized around *Die Islamische Zeitung*, a German-language newspaper focusing on politics, culture, and theology from an anti-globalization perspective (Kuppinger, 2011), these intellectuals idealize Goethe as the first to have synthesized the German and Muslim spirits.

The merging of Islamic and German identities has a long history. After the First World War, Islam emerged as a source of German renewal for both liberal-rationalist and illiberal-spiritualist politics. Fusing protestant ethics, the Enlightenment, and romanticism in a German-Islamic synthesis, Weimar intellectuals such as Jewish-Muslim convert Hugo Marcus saw in Islam 'the most modern, progressive, advanced, and rational of religions' in the tradition of Goethe, Hegel, and Kant (Baer, 2017: 174); conversion to Islam helped redefine and retain a spiritual Germanness in the name of progress (Baer, 2017: 184). Later, Nazi leaders idealized Islam as a soldierly religion and source of spiritual renewal against what they saw as a 'Jewish-led rationalistic modernity' (Motadel, 2014). After the Second World War, generations of German converts to Islam believed that by becoming Muslim one could become a better German (Özyürek, 2014). Both strands shared the conviction of an essential affinity, either rationalist or spiritual, between Germanic and Islamic culture and a Nietzschean critique of Christian morality as self-denying, meek, and artificial.

German convert, Andreas Abu-Bakr Rieger, founder of *Die Islamische Zeitung*,⁴ states that converting to Islam was a way for him to start a revolution without leaving his Catholic conservatism behind (Lau, 2004: 3). A self-defined

Muslim anti-capitalist, Rieger and his group call for a ‘jihad against the market society’ (Lau, 2004: 3). In his conception of Islam, Rieger draws on anti-modernist German thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, and Ernst Jünger who form part of the German far right’s ideological canon (Göpffarth, 2020b; Sedgwick, 2019). The proximity of Rieger’s ideas to the far right is reflected in his having co-founded the magazine *Compact* together with Jürgen Elsässer, a former communist activist. Although Rieger later left the magazine in reaction to its increasingly anti-Muslim stance, *Compact* has become one of the leading German far-right magazines.

German convert, Muhesir Sebastian Hennig, is strongly influenced by Rieger. Formerly a regular contributor to *Die Islamische Zeitung*, the Dresden-based painter has recently gained prominence through his contributions to far-right publications and books on the far-right political movement Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident) (Hennig, 2015a, 2018) and a book co-authored with AfD politician Björn Höcke (Höcke and Hennig, 2018). In his articles, Hennig points out the mutual influences of ‘Orient and Occident’ (Hennig, 2015b). While he criticizes leftist-liberalism for its denial of roots and borders and for having paved the way for a homogenizing globalization, he idealizes Pegida’s nationalism and Islam’s spiritualism as tools with which to counter German self-hate and a globalizing liberal nihilism (Hennig, 2015a: 30–31, 48). In merging German nationalism and Islam, he sees an opportunity to strengthen spiritual Germanness and to root Islam in Germany.

Conservative Muslim-born intellectuals such as Eren Güvercin and Feridun Zaimoğlu are equally influential for Hennig. Hennig shares their Islam-based critique of liberal-secular far-right protagonists such as Thilo Sarrazin, arguing that liberalism neglects the need of human communities for a spiritual base (Güvercin, 2012: 10). The protagonists of this network also reject Islamism as an ‘Arabization of German Islam’ and propose instead a proud embrace of German patriotism and Islam (Güvercin, 2012: 25). To realize this goal, Güvercin founded the Alhambra Society, whose name symbolically underlines the European roots of Islam (Stoldt, 2018).

The ideas presented by this network resonate across a milieu that reaches from conservative German converts to born Muslims yearning for the reconciliation of a strong German Muslim identity. Still marginal, this network is often met with hostility: when presenting his book on Pegida in a Dresden far-right salon, members of the audience left when Hennig revealed that he was Muslim (Petersen, 2015). Nevertheless, parts of the illiberal far right and its elites are increasingly open to the spiritual potential of Islam. Influential far-right intellectuals close to the illiberal Institut für Staatspolitik such as Benedikt Kaiser and Thor von Waldstein, or to platforms such as Jungeuropa Verlag, argue that the reality of contemporary Germany as a multiethnic society and the undeniable presence of Islam calls for a shift from the perception of Islam as ‘threat’ to ‘opportunity’. Following French far-right intellectuals such as Alain Soral these intellectuals see Islam as a potential ally against a ‘hedonistic left liberalism’ and cultural decline

(Eichberger, 2019). They share the far right's general stance against immigration, which they see as yet another expression of an uprooted liberal universalism in the form of multicultural global capitalism. But, contrary to most on the far right, they oppose a binary between a 'free West' and an 'unfree Islam' (Kaiser, 2019). Instead they underline Islam's potential as a spiritual basis for values, identity, and community (Schwarzenberger, 2009) and argue that a Muslim, values-based Europe would be preferable to a spiritless Europe dominated by American capitalism and individualism (Von Waldstein, 2018).

Representatives of this network claim that Christian and Muslim conservatives share a belief in a transcendental power, a collective rootedness in a homeland, and the primary importance of the family, values they claim secular liberals want to destroy. This network presents arguments inverse to network one: it romanticizes Islam as a spiritual entity that has not yet been 'brainwashed' by post-war rationalism, liberalism, or the 1968 movement. This vision of a de-spirited German society opens up space for an Islamo-German alliance against the common enemy of a liberal, capitalist, and secular mainstream (Güvercin, 2012).

Network four: Islam and Germanness are incompatible

Network three's idea of a Germano-Muslim alliance is not, however, appreciated by the entire illiberal German far right. Other anti-modernist, anti-rationalist, anti-capitalist intellectuals, some of whom have a Muslim background, argue that the German spirit needs to be strengthened in order to counter, not to embrace Islam. Representatives of this network such as Sabatina James, Feroz Khan, and Akif Pirinçci use their Muslim backgrounds to warn Germans against a Muslim invasion (James, 2015; Kaiser, 2016; Khan, 2018a). They concur that Germany would be unable to stand up against a strong Muslim identity due to its lack of self-love and self-respect and its overemphasis on the dark sides of its history (Khan, 2018b). Like networks 1 and 2, the protagonists of network four all write and talk about the personal journey that allowed them to shed their Muslim identity to join Germany's national community. Their celebration of the German nation has made them popular among far-right elites representing both the illiberal and liberal currents in the German far-right movement.⁵

While Pakistani-born James converted to Catholicism (James, 2017), Pakistani-background Khan and Turkish-background Pirinçci embraced German nationalism (Khan, 2018a; Pirinçci, 2019). Khan, an influential far-right vlogger close to the Institut für Staatspolitik, argues that Germany's self-hate and focus on its tainted past impedes rather than facilitates integration of immigrants (Khan, 2018b). Formerly a successful writer of cat detective stories and now a regular speaker at Pegida events, Akif Pirinçci is known for his vulgar critique of German society. Calling himself 'little Akif' (Pirinçci, 2019), he aims to break the taboos of political correctness to remind Germany that, to defend itself, it must be more self-loving. He laments that 'Germans and the rest of the civilized are too weak' (Kaiser, 2016).

The views presented by this network resonate with illiberal trends on the far right that argue for a spiritual strengthening of Germanness, either through the embrace of nationalism (Jongen, 2017) or Christianity (Lichtmesz, 2014). In its absolute anti-Islamism, this current overlaps with network two. Books published by representatives of network two are also popular in network four, and the illiberal far-right publisher and online bookseller Antaios sells Necla Kelek's books. Networks three and four draw on the same tropes of illiberalism, arguing that a spiritual tradition is core to European civilization and necessary for the functioning of a nation. Unlike the rationalist branches of the far right, they do not see Islam as inferior to but rather as a force stronger than the liberal individualism that undermines German community and European culture. Networks three and four differ in their conclusions about what this means for German Islam. While network three argues that Muslim and German conservatism should come together to form a pragmatic alliance against liberal rationalism, network four argues that Muslims are a threat ready to invade a de-spirited Germany.

The rejection or assimilation of Islam based on a spiritual understanding of Germanness echoes the shift in mainstream discussions of diversity from a focus on immigrants to Islam. This shift has allowed for an innovation on and mutation of the classical far-right idealization of 'the people' and 'the nation': while the people and the nation continue to function as the conceptual core, the reality of Germany as an immigration country (Müller, 2000) and the more visible presence of Islam have shifted them to new terrain.

Conclusion

Muslim-background public intellectuals and their ideas are now part and parcel of the German far right. They and their narratives actively shape the movement's broad spectrum of exclusivist perspectives on Muslims and Islam. Their presence in far-right publications and events helps to legitimize the radicalization of more moderate right-wing audiences and to challenge the radical anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim positions of the far right. Intellectuals who build on the Germanness-as-rationality model are mostly promoted by far-right elites that embrace a liberal vision of Germanness, particularly in West Germany,⁶ while networks that build on Germanness-as-spirituality have a growing impact among those parts of the leadership that openly favour illiberal notions of Germanness, specifically in the East.⁷ Drawing on competing traditions of Germanness, Muslim-background intellectuals' arguments speak to the far right insofar as they underline the superiority of Germanness and the European civilization. While their positions towards Islam and Muslims differ fundamentally, these intellectuals promote a redemptive notion of a German nation embedded in a transnational European civilization aimed at overcoming feelings of guilt attached to the Holocaust (Özyürek, 2019) and enduring East–West divisions (Kryzowski and Nowicka, 2020) by either claiming a rational-liberal or spiritual-illiberal community and its Judaeo-Christian legacy. This feeds into the far right's dual goal of refashioning a

positive identity for a unitary German people and preventing an assumed cultural decline.

The diversity of actors and currents in the German far right lays bare the contradictory and arbitrary ways the movement responds to Islam, the driving issue for the movement. Christianity and Islam have come to serve as a common matrix through which German identity—be it liberal-rational or illiberal-spiritual—is negotiated and defined. The Christian legacy of the secular-rational trope allows its protagonists to formulate affective and spiritual claims through a rational and individualist vocabulary and vice versa. The perception of Christianity and Islam as distinct traditions and their factual entanglement in right, left, and liberal traditions allows the German far right to merge spiritualist and rationalist elements of the movement in service of their discourses on Islam. Here, the contradictory use of both tropes is not an aberration of marginal politics but the expression of a widely shared basis for national and European identity, one with a long history.

Muslim-background intellectuals are central to the construction of a purified white German identity and European ethnoculture that either excludes or includes Islam without threatening its own positive self-image. The liberal current does so by externalizing politics such as anti-Semitism, sexism, fascism, and homophobia onto a Muslim other that needs to be transformed (Haritaworn, 2010; Korteweg and Yurdakul, 2009; Özyürek, 2014). By embracing secularism as the ‘logical outcome’ of a Judeo-Christian tradition, the far right can assert ‘our Christian culture’ in more implicit ways and redeem the dark sides of Christian-European and German history (Anidjar, 2007: 49). In its reconciliatory and exclusivist versions, the rationalist German far right and its Muslim public intellectuals imagine Islam as an essentialized illiberal other that either must be overcome or Europeanized. At the centre of this rationalism is the spiritualization of the individual choice to embrace a liberating notion of Germanness. In contrast, the illiberal strand aims either at asserting a positive and redemptive Euro-German identity so as to shape an Islam that leaves positive myths of German selfhood untouched or openly calling for a Christian war on Islam. At the core of this spirituality is the rationalisation of a collective embrace of an illiberal-spiritual notion of Germanness. At the end of both tropes stands the yearning for belonging to a redemptive German identity that overcomes past guilt and present polarisation.

Such creative use of the rational and spiritual tropes of Germanness opens up new possibilities for the German far right, both in the political mainstream and on the margins. Religious and political identities are used as prisms through which Germanness is defined. Employing multiple and seemingly contradictory definitions of Germanness may allow both for the celebration of ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ in ways that do not threaten liberal ideals *and* pave the way for illiberal identity constructions. Through their contributions, Muslim-background intellectuals are fundamental to these novel forms of far-right German identity construction in that they allow the movement to both rationalize a spiritual understanding of Germanness as a necessary developmental stage and spiritualize a rational conception of Germanness as redemptive.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. Continuing today, the Islamkonferenz was initiated in 2006 by the German government with the aim to ‘promote the rapprochement between the German state and Muslims’ (Deutsche Islam Konferenz, 2010).
2. Abdel-Samad in *My Farewell to Islam* (2010), Kelek in *The Lost Sons* (2006), and Ramadani in *The Veiled Danger* (2017) all declare that they have broken with Islam. Al-Murabitun is a Sufi Muslim sub-organization that unites many German converts and aims to unite Muslim and German spirituality.
3. Al-Murabitun is a Sufi Muslim sub-organization that unites many German converts and aims to unite Muslim and German spirituality.
4. Abu-Bakr Rieger is also the founder of the Weimar Institute, which aims to bring German Muslims and the classical spiritual tradition of Weimar together.
5. See, for example, Khan’s interview with AfD-leader Beatrix von Storch (Khan, 2018a).
6. For example, AfD leaders as Beatrix von Storch and Jörg Meuthen have both openly embraced Ateş and Abdel-Samad.
7. For example, the circles surrounding East German far-right leader, Björn Höcke, and his close relationship to Muhesir Sebastian Hennig as well as the increasing influence and reach of Feroz Khan.

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