

# **Religion as a Challenge in Preventing Radicalization? Empirical Insights from Germany**

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## **Abstract**

During the last decade, the pedagogical prevention of violent and antidemocratic Islamism has developed as a new field of work. It contains measures of social work, civic education and sometimes elements of religious education. The religious dimension in particular is one of the main differences to more established areas of work like the prevention of right-wing extremism. Based on empirical cases, this paper pursues the question: in what way is religion a relevant dimension in preventing Islamist radicalization in Germany, and which challenges arise from it?

## **German Synopsis**

In den letzten Jahren hat sich die Prävention von gewaltorientiertem und demokratiefeindlichem Islamismus zu einem neuen pädagogischen Handlungsfeld entwickelt. Es umfasst Angebote Sozialer Arbeit, politischer Bildung und zum Teil auch religiöser Bildung. Sie zielen entweder auf die Stärkung junger Menschen gegen mögliche Gefährdungen durch Radikalisierung oder auf die Distanzierung von gewaltorientierten oder demokratiefeindlichen islamistischen Kontexten. Die religiöse Dimension stellt dabei einen wichtigen Unterschied im Vergleich zu etablierten Handlungsfeldern dar, wie etwa der Prävention von Rechtsextremismus. Davon ausgehend stellt sich die Frage, in welcher Weise Religion eine relevante Dimension der Prävention von islamistischer Radikalisierung in Deutschland darstellt und welche Herausforderungen sich daraus ergeben.

Auf Grundlage empirischer Ergebnisse aus dem Kontext der wissenschaftlichen Begleitung von Modellprojekten der Radikalisierungsprävention des Bundesprogramms „Demokratie leben!“ werden zwei Typen religiöser Ansätze in der Präventionsarbeit dargestellt. Im Anschluss diskutieren wir zusammenfassend mögliche Konsequenzen der Integration religiöser Perspektiven in diese pädagogische Arbeit. Dazu zählen einerseits Vorteile wie die Akzeptanz bei den Adressierten oder die Beteiligung muslimischer Organisationen. Andererseits zeigen sich auch spezifische Herausforderungen wie beispielsweise ein erhöhtes Maß an Skepsis gegenüber pädagogischen Akteuren und potenzielle Spannungen zwischen unterschiedlichen didaktischen Prinzipien. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass es keine grundlegenden Widersprüche zwischen politischer Bildung und Religion in diesem Handlungsfeld gibt. Angesichts der vielfältigen Ursachen und Motivationen für islamistische Radikalisierungen ist eine Bandbreite unterschiedlicher pädagogischer Antworten notwendig.

During the past decade, the pedagogical prevention of violent and antidemocratic Islamism has developed as a new field of work. Through measures of social work, civic education, and sometimes elements of religious education, this work aims to either strengthen young people against possible dangers of radicalization or to promote distancing strategies from violent or antidemocratic Islamist contexts. In Germany, the majority of this work is realized by civil society initiatives which are funded by government institutions. Within a relatively short amount of time, a diverse landscape has emerged consisting of different organizations pursuing various approaches (Schau et al. 2017; Said/Fouad 2018). This variety, which focuses strongly on the local level, can be seen as a special trait of prevention work in Germany (Nordbruch 2017).

Compared especially to more established areas of work such as the prevention of right-wing extremism, the religious dimension of this new field of work is one of its main distinguishing features. Against the background of being a rather unestablished area of pedagogical work with a variety of actors and approaches, there is an ongoing debate about the role of religious organizations and the significance of religious approaches in prevention work (ibid.; Greuel et al. 2016; Charchira 2017, Schmidt 2018; Taubert/Hantel 2017). However, up to now this debate has rarely been based on empirical research that considers the concrete implementation of pedagogical work.

In order to contribute to this debate, we build on empirical research conducted in the context of the evaluation of pilot projects for the prevention of Islamist radicalization in the German federal program, "Live Democracy!" ("Demokratie leben!"). In particular, we seek to explore the question: in what way is religion a relevant dimension in the prevention of Islamist radicalization in Germany, and which challenges arise from it? In order to discuss this question, we will first outline the role of religion for radicalization. In a next step, based on empirical cases, we will present two types of religious approaches carried out in prevention work. We see this typology as a first step in the attempt to ground the debate on the role of religion empirically; it is also an invitation to complement, differentiate or contradict it. Finally, we will show advantages and challenges resulting from the religious dimension in pedagogical prevention on a more general level, and we will conclude that there is no contradiction per se between civic education and religion in this field of work.

Before we discuss the prevention of radicalization, we would like to take a swift look at the role of religion<sup>1</sup> in radicalization itself. As studies illustrate, processes of radicalization are complex combinations of manifold causes, motivations, and influencing factors. Therefore, religion is only one aspect among others, but it does contribute to the process. For example, radicalization is often anticipated by a personal and religious search for sense and answers. Also, a common trait of many Islamist extremists is that most of them were not very religious before they joined extremist scenes. This means that they often do not have the knowledge and experience to put extremist interpretations of Islam into perspective. Therefore they are potentially more receptive to extremism as they are not capable of weighing up differing versions of Islam against each other or of putting forward theological counterarguments (Wiktorowicz 2005; Precht 2007; Venhaus 2010; Glaser/Herding/Langner 2018).

Finally, social work and youth work have long been domains of work for major Christian organizations (Gabriel 2018). However, we know little about how religion actually becomes manifest in their work. Islamic organizations, on the other hand, are just emerging as new actors in these fields in Germany, and they need to find their own ways of work (Charchira 2017; Schau et al. 2017). The prevention of radicalization is presently an entry-point for Islamic organizations to these fields. In the empirical analysis that follows, we hope to provide some first systematic insights into their work.

## Two Types of Religious Approaches

The following empirical findings arise from the evaluation of pilot projects on the prevention of Islamist radicalization in the German federal program "Live Democracy!" ("Demokratie leben!"), which is funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth..<sup>2</sup> The German Youth Institute has been evaluating the program since 2015, building on both quantitative data (online surveys) and qualitative data (semi-structured interviews with project staff, group discussions with young people participating in the projects, participant observations of pedagogical measures, document analysis). Although it is not our main research

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<sup>1</sup> As far as the concept of religion is concerned, we understand the term (referring to Gennerich/Kein/Streib 2018) in an open and discursive way (Matthes 1992), but we limit the openness by pinpointing two dimensions of the concept of religion: first an experience of "transcendancy" (Luckmann), and second that it relates to issues of "ultimate concern" (cf. Tillich 1957). Moreover, when we speak about religion in the context of radicalization towards violent Islamism, the term religion will specifically refer to "Islam."

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.demokratie-leben.de/en.html>

focus, we also examine the role of religion in the pedagogical work for a sample of projects. Following the principles of the documentary method (Bohnsack 2010) we created an early typology consisting of two different types of religious approaches. This is based on four projects in which religion is an important aspect of pedagogical work and which represent characteristic dimensions for this kind of work. These four projects pursue direct pedagogical work with young people in the area of targeted prevention, i.e., projects working with young people because they are facing a higher risk of radicalization or because they are involved in processes of affiliation with violent and antidemocratic Islamist groups or ideas. Therefore, this is only a part of a broader field.

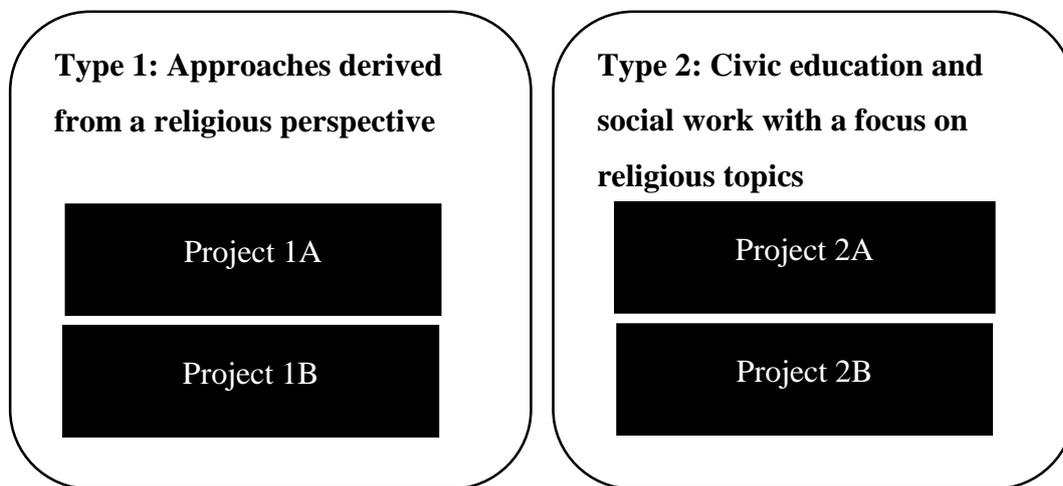


Figure 1: Types and Projects

### **Type 1: Approaches derived from a religious perspective**

The specific trait of the first type is that religious education is a key element of the practical work in the projects. Before elaborating on this point, we will delineate the pedagogical practice of the two projects under consideration.

From the perspective of preventative logic, both projects work in the realm of “indicated prevention”, which means they address young people who are (already) involved with extremist groups or ideologies. Here, both projects provide long-term one-to-one counseling, which involves talking about Islam, politics, and life in general, and also assisting with problems like achieving good grades in school or helping the young people to deal with their court cases.

Another major part of work in these projects is “selective prevention,” which means that the projects address young people who are deemed to be specifically at risk of becoming appealed by extremist groups or ideologies.

Project 1A is a social community initiative started by young Muslims. As an example of their work, they recount that they were informed, that a Jihadist-Salafist, called the “radicalizer,” started to attend prayers in a local mosque and approached young people. Practitioners from the project then attended the mosque and talked and debated with the youngsters there, answering questions on Islam and giving advice on whatever day-to-day issues troubled the young people. In this way, the project intervened to strengthen young people against radicalization.

The other project is carried out by a secular NGO in collaboration with a mosque. Within the mosque, the project invites young people to weekly discussion groups. In the groups, they can talk about Islam, politics, and their daily lives in a religious framing, but it’s also a chance to meet and socialize.

On a more general level, both projects are set in the context of youth work; both apply methods of religious education partially combined with civic education. They aim to foster reflective thinking among the young people and to strengthen their integration in their local community. Building strong relationships with the young people is critical to this work.

There are four major ways in which religion becomes manifest in the pedagogical work of these projects. They either aim to challenge extremist narratives and ideology or to foster Islam against extremism:

The deconstruction of extremist narratives and ideology is a key element of these projects. This is primarily done by evoking reflective thinking through Islam:

Project 1A does so by telling stories. These can be religious stories that are taken from the Qur’an or the Islamic tradition, or they may be stories taken from personal experience. Generally, the stories are framed in a religious manner and relate to issues of “ultimate concern.” These stories are applied strategically to specific extremist narratives when they come up, in the hope that the youngsters will re-evaluate these narratives on the basis of a new perspective.

Project 1B rather guides young people towards reflecting on their own lives from an Islamic perspective. The practitioners give a short presentation that elaborates on Islamic subjects relating to issues in the youngsters’ daily lives. The subsequent discussion intends to guide

participants in reflecting on the way they live and act and to inspire them to try alternatives pathways. The practitioners say that it is about finding your personal theology and reflecting on your biography (1B 2016).<sup>3</sup>

While both projects talk about Islam to evoke reflective thinking, project 1B guides its participants towards reflecting on their own lives, while project 1A rather guides them to reflect on the Islamic content itself.

A second approach for deconstructing extremist narratives is through religious counterarguments. Both projects collect and teach arguments that are supposed to prove that the extremist interpretations of Islam are wrong, for example by giving evidence from the Qur'an or the Prophet's traditions. For example, a practitioner of project 1B in an interview tells us about a young man who states that Islam allows violence against non-believers. As a counterargument, the practitioner shows the young man a passage from the Qur'an and says:

“Look here, [...] it says ‘if you kill a man’ – and it doesn't say a Muslim, but a man – ‘then it's as if you killed all mankind [...]. Now he has to think about it. And this is a really theological approach” (1B 2016: 1570-1580).

In support of such reasoning, sometimes an Imam or other religious authorities are asked to assist.

The other approaches are basically designed to strengthen the “ordinary,” non-extremist Islam. On the one hand, this is done by teaching knowledge about Islam. This can be basic knowledge on rituals and scripture, or it can involve discussing advanced questions that are raised by the young people with whom the practitioners work. This relates to research that shows that a lack of knowledge about Islam is one of the influencing factors that can contribute to make young people more susceptible to radicalization. On the other hand, the approaches respond to the premise that radicalization is about personal searches and disorientation, and that extremist groups are able to provide young people with a tight and meaningful social enclosure. Therefore, the projects provide a religious community as a positive alternative for these young people, either by themselves or by guiding them to a favorable mosque where they can experience Islam in “another way” (cf. 1A 2018: 1973-2063).

In the two Type 1 projects, pedagogical prevention of violent extremism is deeply entangled with Islam. To these practitioners, Islam is a central part of their identity and rationality. Countering radicalization through a religious perspective is their natural way of

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<sup>3</sup> We quote from our interviews with project staff by citing the anonymized name of the project, the year in which the interview was conducted, and, where relevant, the line numbers of the interview transcript.

approaching the issue. As a staff member of project 1A says: "when religion is involved, Islam somehow needs to be part of the solution." (1A 2018: 1789ff.).

## **Type 2: Civic education and social work with a focus on religious topics**

We distinguish a second type of approach, which we describe as civic education with elements of social work where religion is nevertheless an important aspect. This type is based on two projects which are on the border between universal and selective prevention. They work with adolescents who are ascribed a specifically higher risk for Islamist radicalization. The preventive goal is to strengthen the participants against possible extremist groups in their environment.

Project 2A is a collaboration between a mosque and a secular NGO; Project 2B is run by a secular NGO for youth work. They both work with their participants in a long-term group setting, and each established a youth group that meets regularly, generally once a week. In these group settings, the projects combine content-related discussions with leisure activities like sports or trips. The idea behind this is to strengthen group ties as well as the bond between project staff and participants so as to create a foundation for working on the participants' attitudes.

In contrast to the Type 1 the goals of this type are rather framed by civic education and, partially, social work. Project 2A aims to support the feeling of being a part of the German society through participation. The main goals of project 2B are to support a sense of transculturality, a democratic understanding, and a positive attitude towards diversity.

Despite the focus on civic education, religion is a relevant aspect for both projects. In the first instance, religion is essential for gaining access to the participants: both projects address Muslim adolescents by saying explicitly that they will provide space for questions about their faith. The projects' main work consists of weekly meetings to discuss political and religious issues. Some of these topics are set by the project practitioners, some by the participants. There is a great variety of topics, such as: political conflicts, like the situation in Turkey or Syria; discrimination experiences and ways of dealing with them; gender roles; homosexuality; questions about the practice of faith; discussion of Islam and democracy but also of issues like the adolescents' future plans or their choice of subjects at school.

The projects want to establish a space where participants can talk freely without being "othered" as Muslim and without being addressed as representatives for all people of Turkish origin in Germany; these are situations that some of the participants have experienced at school.

On the other hand, a space for open discussion does not imply that problematic statements are not contradicted. In general, these projects aim to differentiate and deconstruct, not telling the participants what is right and what is wrong. Instead, they want to stimulate discussion and foster participants' skills for matter-of-fact discussion without letting emotions dominate over reasoning or subscribing to conspiracy theories.

Practitioners in Project 2B, for example, describe a group meeting where participants discussed a political conflict in an area of Syria by relating it to the topic of human rights. In a first step, the project staff showed pictures of different actors in this conflict, e.g. of soldiers and civilians. The group analyzed each picture together, talking about the perspectives of different actors in this conflict. In a next step, they talked about consequences of this foreign conflict for their own day-to-day lives in Germany. Different opinions were expressed by the group, also depending on the origin of the participants and their families. The project staff saw their main task as moderating the ensuing discussion, taking care that discussion did not become over-emotionalized and providing participants with the tools and instructions to analyze the different positions in the conflict based on political criteria. While the subject itself was not religious, religious perspectives played an important part in the discussion.

As we know from group discussions with the participants, the opportunity for talking about religious issues and being in a group with other young Muslims is one important reason for taking part in the projects. Participants stress the fun they have in the project and the feelings of belonging to the group. In addition, the participants emphasize the positive meaning of education outside of a school setting; that they undertake activities they otherwise would not become involved in; and that they talk about political issues and gain knowledge.

Even though the projects do not bring religion into the discussion all the time, they do stress the role of religion in civic education and social work in a special way by creating an open and safe space for Muslim adolescents to discuss political and religious issues. At this time, this kind of religion-sensitive pedagogical work is still quite rare in Germany. As we can see, both types provide knowledge about Islam and deconstruct extremist narratives. The difference between the two types lies in the way they broach the issue, which in the case of Type 2 is oriented more around the principles of civic education. Furthermore, the goals of the projects of Type 2 are framed by civic education and social work.

A crucial point in this special kind of work and a special challenge for the projects is to find adequate staff who have the necessary qualifications and who are accepted by all actors in the project, including Muslim communities, secular NGOs, and especially the participants.

## Advantages and Challenges

Finally, we would like to summarize the consequences resulting from the religious dimension in pedagogical prevention work on a more general level.

On the one hand, there are certain advantages. In this field of work, it is generally difficult to reach young people (cf. Figlesthler 2017, p. 178-179), especially when they are actually appealed by or affiliated with extremist groups and ideologies. The projects we presented here, however, manage to engage them in pedagogical processes. In part, the projects succeed because they address young people as Muslim brothers or sisters, or because they share a set of similarities (being young, growing up in the same neighborhood, being perceived as Muslim) and therefore similar experiences. Project 1B, for example, states that practitioners can easily get young people to talk with them about serious and personal issues when they “take them by their religious side” (1B 2017: 1257- 1293).

Secondly, these projects—especially Type 1—can provide religious arguments against religious narratives of extremist groups; this is significant because transcendent and ultimate dimensions of religion make arguments particularly hard to verify and thus to contest in pedagogical work. So there is evidence that arguments that are based on the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition may be accepted as convincing if they are brought into the pedagogical process by Imams or social workers who are well versed in Islamic theology.

Finally, the public debate on Islamist radicalization is set in a context of polarized public opinions on Islam. Some central narratives of Islamist extremism are feeding on this polarization, emphasizing any injustice that Muslims suffer. The preventive work may involuntarily nurture these narratives, especially if it is perceived that the majority actors address the Muslim minority as being a threat (cf. Lindekilde 2012). Including Muslim actors as part of the preventive work ensures that their perspective is present in the field as well.

On the other hand, there are also specific challenges. First of all, projects addressing religion have to deal to a higher degree with significant levels of skepticism. For secular projects, skepticism from Muslim communities or mosques can be an issue; for example, there may be questions on why a secular project is working with “their” Muslim young people on religious topics. Community projects or collaborative projects have to deal with skepticism from both the “inside” and the “outside.” By inside we refer to Muslim communities or mosques who can be skeptical towards projects aiming to prevent radicalization because they perceive them as a general accusation, implying that all Muslim young people are potentially radical.

This is a general challenge for all projects in this field, as “prevention of radicalization” is a very strong label with a high risk of stigmatization. To reduce this risk, projects need to act sensitively towards the people with whom they work, and they should reflect carefully what traits they ascribe to them, especially in the field of selective prevention.

Skepticism from the outside refers to the point that in present-day Germany, there are polarized debates about the role of Islam, sometimes accompanied by a mistrust towards all Muslims, which is fostered by certain media and right-wing populists (Ceylan/Kiefer 2018, p. 33ff.). Muslim organizations engaging in prevention work sometimes have to deal with hostilities that are at least partially nurtured by these debates.<sup>4</sup>

When looking at the concrete pedagogical work, there are potential tensions between the principles of work. Extra-curricular civic education in Germany is rather oriented at a demand of controversy and the prohibition against overwhelming.<sup>5</sup> In religious education, on the contrary, claims of religious truth may occur that may contradict the principles mentioned previously. Based on our findings, we assert that it is important for professional pedagogical prevention work that project practitioners are aware of these tensions, reflect on them, and find suitable ways for dealing with them.

## Conclusion

The religious dimension of the prevention of radicalization has barely been the subject of empirical research. The typology we present here is a first attempt at structuring the dimensions that characterize this kind of work. It is supposed to be a starting point for further analysis, and the typology may be revised, complemented, and further differentiated in this process. Moreover, as religious approaches to the prevention of radicalization are a relatively new field of work, they may further evolve and possibly become more established. Their future relevance, however, is to be seen, since those projects heavily depend on the field’s vigorous dynamics, short-term funding, and ongoing public debates.

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4 In 2017, for example, there were various media reports after a blogger accused Muslim employees of a non-Muslim NGO which is pursuing prevention work of being linked to Islamist extremists. The two employees were suspended from their work while the case was investigated. Although the accusations were eventually disproved, this debate caused further damage to the public perception of Muslim actors in prevention work, both on the organizational and the personal level (Said/Fouad 2018, p.8).

5 These are two of the three principles of the Beutelsbach Consensus (1976), a pivotal basis for civic education in Germany.

In summary, our findings show, however, that there is no contradiction per se between civic education and religion in this field, and that it is reasonable to establish pedagogical activities that explicitly address religion. Of course, this does not mean that all projects working in this field should do so. Moreover, our research shows that religious perspectives are taken into the field not only by "typical" religious actors, such as Mosques or the entities they are organized in, but also by "secular" NGOs that are driven by a religious Islamic motivation or by a specific sensitivity towards religion.

Islamic perspectives complement and enrich the field with an additional perspective. From a participatory view, this perspective is an essential part in a field that focuses on Muslims as bearers of a problem in a minority/majority context. These projects tend to be a way of successfully approaching some target groups, including among them some actors that may not be reached otherwise. As the causes and motivations for Islamist radicalization are manifold, there need to be manifold pedagogical answers as well.

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