

## HANDOUT 2.2.4

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT LINCOLN

### *Assesing Religion:*

#### MEASURES OF INVOLVEMENT DIFFER FROM THOSE OF US

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When Florian Leibert arrived in the United States for his semester as an exchange student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, one of the first things he noticed was the churches that seemed to be on every street corner.

The 24-year-old student from rural Bavaria was raised Lutheran but is not religious.

“While in Lincoln, I noticed a lot more Christians than I thought I would,” he said, “and more people with obsolete opinions.”

Alex Ruthsatz, a student in Berlin, also noticed the difference when he visited. When asked how Germans perceive Americans, Ruthsatz’ response was quick: Americans are “very religious.”

Meanwhile, many Americans’ perceptions of Germans would seem to cover much of modern Europe – secular, atheistic and immoral. After all, it was the famed German philosopher Freidrich Nietzsche who declared, “God is dead.”

“Some of them just don’t care about religion or beliefs,” said Tristan Foy, a 22-year-old Nebraska Wesleyan University student who spent his spring 2007 semester in Trier, the oldest city in Germany. “I live in a predominately Catholic area (in Germany), and a lot of people say how they were raised Catholic, but they don’t really have much to do with the church nowadays.”

These views seem strange when one considers that the “religious” United States promises freedom of religion and separation of church and state while “secular” Germany still recognizes Christian churches as parallel governments intertwined with the state.

The *Christian Science Monitor* reported in 2006 that “there are more theologians in the current German parliament than in any other Western parliament, including the U.S. Congress.”

No one in Germany seems to be alarmed by this, as might be the case if it happened in America. Germans accept religion and religious leaders as part of their storied history and culture. To deny the influence of religion would be to deny hundreds of years of German

identity.

In addition, ways of measuring religious involvement differ between Americans and Germans, who believe there are other ways to be faithful than showing up for service every Sunday morning – like paying church taxes, for starters.

Meanwhile, some Germans worry that the rise of ultra-conservative evangelism, an American import, will take advantage of a semi-religious government. At the same time, the churches are resisting efforts by the non-religious to bring Germany into a world of post-religious morals and ethics. Debates rage about which issues and policies churches should have influence over, and some worry the argument could lead to the kind of polarization currently seen in American politics.

But overall, Germans believe religious influences in the government help more than they hurt. Their system demonstrates that a little church in state might not be such a bad idea after all.

Religion looms large in the histories of both Germany and the United States.

The United States traces its roots to pilgrims seeking religious freedom, and the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and effectively separates church and state. The nation’s founders feared the type of government-church intertwining found in European countries at the time.

Germany’s constitution, on the other hand, includes the freedom to practice religion, but it doesn’t separate the churches from the government. The constitution, first adopted in West Germany in 1949, explicitly says that no state church shall exist, but it also establishes the explicit rights of churches to act as public corporations, give religious instruction in schools, administer hospitals and retirement centers and provide services in prisons and even legislative buildings. The government even protects Sundays and religious holidays as days of rest and spiritual improvement.

Germany’s history as part of Europe’s Holy Roman Empire set this standard for government-church intermingling.

Catholic and Protestant churches ruled much of Europe and con-

tributed to the development of its nations for centuries, but Germany stands out from the others because it never experienced revolution and re-creation of the government. Germany's citizens never removed religious leaders and influences from the government, and today the churches maintain an authority that is not allowed in other countries.

"The separation of state and church never really came through," said Hartmut Zinser, professor of religious studies at the Free University of Berlin. "The churches still have privileges from the Middle Ages that have not been abolished."

These privileges include the right to levy taxes, participate in parliament and teach religion in public schools. German public school students are even required to take classes in ethics or religion.

In addition, the *Bundestag*, Germany's parliament, is currently controlled by the Christian Democratic Union, a political party created by Catholics and Protestants in 1949 to advocate for the churches and their members.

Nevertheless, Germans make a concerted effort to keep religious ideology out of government and politics.

Stephen Burnett, an associate professor of classics and religious studies at UNL [University of Nebraska at Lincoln], said Germans use much less religious imagery in politics than Americans do – not because they're all atheists but because they disagree with how American politicians often use fundamentalist and right-wing imagery to justify policies on topics such as war or environmentalism.

"They find such arguments profoundly unimpressive, and German Christians find them downright depressing," Burnett said.

Politicians use so little religious speech that Germans were shocked when nearly all members of parliament opted to be sworn in under the religious oath instead of the standard oath of office after the 2006 elections.

That "religious" version ends with the words "so God help me" and is otherwise identical to the non-religious oath.

According to a 2005 survey by Cambridge researchers, between 41 percent and 49 percent of Germans claimed to be agnostic or atheist, compared with a 2007 Cambridge survey reporting that 3 percent to 9 percent of Americans hold similar beliefs.

Statistics like these often lead Americans to assume European society is much more secular and less influenced by religious faith or the church.

"I think many of even the religious Germans probably have some relaxed values, perhaps more so than Americans, although it could just be the youth," said Foy, the Nebraska Wesleyan student. "For example, they may have a belief system that they at least give thought to, but still it doesn't bother them to cohabit with a partner."

But Germans often accuse Americans of immorality and misguidance, too. Depending on how one understands religiosity and the role of churches in society, both Germans and Americans could be right. Even Foy, who said he once believed Europe to be "spiritually dead," now believes Germans maintain some sort of spirituality and moral code even if they don't often talk about it.

"You measure religiosity in different ways in America than in Germany," said Uwe Siemon-Netto, a German and a Lutheran theologian. "In America, 30 or 40 percent are going to church any given Sunday. That is not the case in Germany, where it's maybe four, five, six percent. On the other hand, [Germans] do bother to pay their church tax, which is significant."

Siemon-Netto doubted any American would be willing to pay an additional 10 percent of their income in church taxes on top of all other taxes.

Even those who don't believe that attending church or tithing equals righteousness can find measures of religiosity that show differences between American and German culture.

Siemon-Netto cited social statistics from the two countries. Between 1999 and 2004, Germans performed 15 abortions for every 100 live births, compared with an estimated 16 to 20 in the United States, according to the German Federal Statistics Office and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. Germany also experiences only two divorces per 1,000 people annually, while the United States has 7.5, according to the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics. Some American states still use the death penalty; Germany abolished capital punishment in its 1949 constitution. To some, statistics such as these make Germany the more pious nation.

Germans also don't seem as tied to strict interpretation of scripture as Americans and are more willing to discuss and debate doctrine and theology. Siemon-Netto said German newspapers even run articles and opinion pieces on religious issues, a practice that he says surpasses any kind of religious coverage and involvement by American media.

At the same time, German theologians are less likely to participate in the kind of evangelism seen in some American religious circles. And church members are less likely to participate – or even listen.

"Their relationship to the institutional church is different than in America," Burnett said. "In America, if you are a member of a church body, you are expected to give voluntarily, to serve and to participate."

However, Germans who consider themselves members of a religion don't necessarily get involved. Many retain religious identification out of tradition, and so even though few actually show up for service on Sunday, a majority still call themselves religious.

"It's perfectly normal to simply identify yourself that way," Burnett said.

This phenomenon isn't exclusive to Christians. Germany's Jews and Muslims tend not to participate in religious practices, either. However, Germany's Jewish organizations are not intertwined with the state in the same fashion as Christian churches (though they are allocated taxes in the same way), and the German government essentially ignores mosques and Muslim organizations.

Many Germans associate with their church only by registering with the government and paying their taxes. The process is more structured and public than in America.

"If you choose to identify, as an American, that's the choice of you and your family," Burnett said. "That's nobody's business. There's no registration office in Washington, D.C. In Germany, it's formal. It's public record. Yet, there is no expectation that church membership requires church attendance."

Burnett, who has lived in Germany four times since 1984, said the churches he attended averaged anywhere from a dozen or fewer people every Sunday to full congregations. Involvement often depended on the region: Germany's rural areas have higher rates of religious involvement. Still, he said, nearly everyone seemed to identify with one organization or another.

Because Germans measure religious involvement differently, they tend to assign churches different responsibilities than Americans might. With few people sitting in their pews to preach to and to educate about theology, church leaders have the time (and money, thanks to the church taxes) to promote welfare through social services, spearhead community programs and appeal to the government. Germans view churches less as institutions that exist to guide individuals to salvation and more as vehicles to maintain social order and influence the government.

"The German churches have a tendency to speak out as a kind of liberal conscience of the state," Burnett said. "They try to call the state to do things on a moral basis. Politicians often ignore them, but it is a way they can make their presence felt."

After failing to act effectively against the Holocaust and Communist rule, German churches might now feel compelled to speak out on social issues to prevent further failures. With churches lobbying, politicians can leave religion out of their debates and focus on the issues at hand. It's a much different system than the one Americans know, but some experts argue it works just as well.

Because of the German churches' role in society, it seems many Germans want churches to stick around even if they don't want theology in their lives.

"The churches are organizations of social responsibility," said Zinser, the Free University professor. "It's a belief we have in Germany, and it's what Germans say the churches should be doing."

In fact, some believe churches hold a monopoly on social services because of the sheer amount of work they do running infirmaries,

retirement homes, orphanages and historical and modern churches as well as employing clergy and lay people to provide education, healthcare, religious sacraments and social work.

As atheism and non-religious movements grow, some progressive Europeans want to reject this traditional church role in favor of state-administered systems. These ideas, strong in Britain and France, have more support in the former East Germany, where remnants of Communist suppression and right-wing extremism still dominate the religious landscape.

But Germans seem to still want that social arrangement, especially in places like Saxony and Bavaria, where religious involvement remains relatively high and where the government enjoys having a "branch" that believes it exists solely to attend to these responsibilities.

"The German churches are not branches of the civil service, per se," Burnett said. "They are independent corporations that have special responsibilities and privileges within the German state. But they believe they have these civil service responsibilities to society."

Even those who call themselves non-religious seem to believe the churches should take responsibility for Germany's social welfare. The struggle between religion and atheism is over ideology, not the churches' right to exist. As long as influences of extremism don't pollute politics and as long as churches continue to provide for society, Germans seem content. Their system represents an increasingly rare remnant of history and serves to remind Europe of its roots. Even now, as secular democracies continue to develop in Europe and elsewhere, the German system continues to demonstrate a unique way that church and state can get along.

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*Living Side By Side**by Joel Gehringer*

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Harun Bulut feels comfortably at home and yet, at the same time, uneasily far away from it. In the basement of Berlin's Sehitlik mosque on this Sunday night, he and a dozen men, heads covered and shoes removed, crowd in a corner, clutching prayer books and speaking in Turkish about the word of Allah before the day's evening prayer.

As imam of the mosque, Bulut leads the study group, teaching lessons and peppering the conversation with lighthearted words and jokes.

Bulut's words and attitude make the session feel more like a casual get-together than a prayer meeting, and the men he leads feel at ease before the official prayers.

Steadily, more members enter the mosque, and when the group reaches about three dozen, evening prayer begins.

Down here, in this sprawling room decorated with blue-green carpet and mural-sized scripture passages, the men feel safe. Inside the walls of Sehitlik, they can go about their sacred business without worrying about who will object or disapprove.

In here, there are only brothers in faith; out there, everything else.

"The mosque is a very big and expansive building," Bulut said. "The Turkish visit this mosque and feel something familiar. They feel like we are at home."

Built in 1999, the Sehitlik mosque stands on ground already connected with Turkish heritage. Outside the doors lies the oldest Turkish cemetery in Germany, a relic from the days of the Ottoman Empire. Turkish soldiers who died in World War I are buried here.

When the mosque was planned, Berlin's Muslim leaders thought no one would object because the area was already inhabited by Turkish Muslim immigrants.

But the non-Muslims did complain, saying the dome of the mosque and the two prominent minarets stood too high to meet building codes – a thinly veiled objection to the mosque's placement in their backyard.

The complaints from the community wouldn't stop Muslim leaders from building, however. Sehitlik was a necessity.

"This mosque was built because there was a need for it," Bulut said. "There are a lot of Turkish Muslim people who want to pray here in a mosque, and it's a cultural need to build this mosque."

So the mosque went up in spite of the objections of the non-Muslims. After all, who cares what they think?

In essence, that attitude prevails among all of Berlin's major religious groups, whether Muslim, Jewish, Catholic or Protestant.

On the surface, each professes a politically correct willingness to work together and settle their differences. But while leaders talk of peace, youngsters attack each other in dark alleys, right-wing fundamentalists terrorize homes and schools, religious leaders try to form shady alliances and neighborhoods object to a new mosque that might attract undesirables.

Even in a country where secularism reigns and nearly 58 percent of its citizens say they are uninterested in religion, Christians, Jews and Muslims just will not cooperate.

It's not only a German problem, though. The conflicts exist across the globe, and they often cause much more dire situations elsewhere. Berlin has yet to see the type of violence exhibited in Palestine or Northern Ireland.

But as a newly reunified and freed city in a post-Sept. 11 world, Berlin might represent Europe's 21st century Petri dish of interfaith relations. As each religion attempts to expand in the city, it must also avoid bumping elbows with and igniting the ire of another.

The traditions and beliefs of Christianity have slowly slipped out of Germany, the birthplace of Protestantism and homeland of the head of the Catholic Church. This decline has made Germany's Christian leaders nervous, and they have begun new efforts to reinvigorate the church.

Turkish immigrants are bringing Islam to Berlin in droves, with about 400,000 immigrants currently living in the city. Muslim organizations want to build mosques for these immigrants, and they want so-called German-Germans to coexist with Muslims without a fight.

Berlin also hosts the fastest-growing Jewish community in the world, with nearly 12,000 Jews now living here – three times as many as 15 years ago. The number of synagogues, community centers and kosher restaurants in Berlin has swelled. Currently, more Jews are immigrating to Germany than to Israel or the United States, leading some to declare a Jewish Renaissance.

With each community trying to survive and push its own agenda, problems are inevitable. But if leaders and members of these faiths

can find ways to settle their differences, the world could look to Berlin as a model for peaceful coexistence.

Religious leaders and experts remain skeptical. Some believe the key to cooperation lies not in reconciling religious doctrines but in getting drastically different cultures to live peacefully side by side.

Bulut says he wants Muslims to get along with others. But he knows some outside the walls of the Sehlik mosque don't like him or his people, and while he invites Christian and Jewish leaders to visit the mosque and gain some understanding, he's not going to jump through any hoops to make it happen.

Stephan Kramer is tired of the questions. Every day, someone asks, "What can we do for you?" or "How can we help you?" or "We feel so guilty. What can we do to make it better?"

It makes him sick.

As secretary general of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, the country's largest Jewish advocacy group, he constantly encounters German citizens wishing to make up for the crimes of the Holocaust.

"Everywhere I go, and I find this astonishing," Kramer said about running up against the German feeling of guilt. "I say to young Germans, 'You are not guilty. There is no such thing as a citizen guilt. But you are responsible for the present and future.'"

In response to those questions of guilt and repentance, Kramer asks people to speak against discrimination and persecution, but he knows few actually will. Kramer himself struggles to do so. A racist joke here, a stereotype there – everyone hears them. Some laugh. Few object.

If progress is being made at all, it's a slow and painstaking process.

The council exists for progress, not only among Jews but among Germans in general. Formed in 1950, the organization played a key role in the fate of Jews in Germany after World War II.

Kramer said the council was formed with one goal in mind: Get all Jews out of Germany and leave the country to its Christian roots – mostly Lutherans and other Protestants in the north and mostly Catholics in the south – the way the Germans seemingly wanted it.

"[The council] was built to close down, switch off the lights, say bye-bye and get the last one out," Kramer said.

Largely, the efforts worked. Roughly 200,000 to 300,000 Jews lived in Germany in 1945, but in about a decade, only 25,000 to 27,000 remained, and most weren't happy living in the "house of the butcher." Those numbers stayed steady for the next 30 years.

But in 1989, as communism fell and reunification of East and West Germany loomed, Jewish leaders decided to save what small religious communities were left in Germany. They looked for ways to encourage immigration, to be sure Jews in Germany would not die out and inadvertently realize Hitler's goal of a Jew-free country.

When the Iron Curtain lifted in 1989, immigration came almost naturally. Already, Jewish leaders in East Berlin had encouraged Soviet Jews to move from Russia to escape outbursts of nationalistic violence, and after the Soviet Union disintegrated, Jews from the East flooded Germany looking for relatives, jobs and a new way of life. In about 10 years, the Jewish population rose to 100,000.

Not all of the Jews were devoutly religious, of course. Community-building became a matter of preserving the Jewish culture and religion was only one aspect of that. Many of the Jews who immigrated weren't really Jewish at all, having a distant Jewish heritage or only a Jewish father, not a Jewish mother as required under Judaic law. Some did not practice Judaism and knew very little about their religion, but they came anyway – as an ethnic group.

Christians also experienced problems during this period. The Christian churches of Germany, both Catholic and Protestant, are pseudo-governmental institutions. Germany's government recognizes the churches as it would any corporation, and in return, Germany's churches sanction the government, an acknowledgement of Christianity's historical impact on the country. Members of these churches – mainly Catholic and Evangelical Protestant – pay a special church tax to fund the church as a governing body. The tax wavers between 8 percent and 10 percent of one's income.

After the war, the numbers of practicing Catholics and Protestants in West Germany dropped, with the sharpest decreases occurring in the late 1960s and 1970s.

In the East, Communist leaders effectively purged religious organizations by denying practicing Christians jobs and education. Active Christians dropped to less than 5 percent of the population. Secularism began to dominate the previously Judeo-Christian Europe as a tide of atheism and moral relativism rose.

By the end of the 1990s, Jews and Christians found themselves moving in opposite directions – the former gaining members and influence and the latter declining and struggling to make up lost income. But on a religious and cultural basis, the two managed to get along. Christian attitudes toward Jews shifted thanks to softening language from the Vatican, and the two cultures realized their shared history and heritage.

But another large religious population quietly existed in Berlin, and neither Christian nor Jew seemed to notice or care until those planes hit the towers across the Atlantic.

Muslims had lived in Germany for decades by 2001, the first large groups coming from Turkey as part of Germany's post-war guest worker program. Few immigrants actually practiced Islam, and few Christian or Jewish leaders and scholars took notice of or interest in the burgeoning population. Only after the terrorist attacks in the United States did many of the secular Turkish, Arab and Kurdish peo-



ple living in Germany rediscover their Muslim roots.

Suddenly, the Muslims were everywhere, and now Jews and Christians believed they had to pay attention.

“Dealing with them was the only way to get out of trouble,” Kramer said of the popular perception. “I mean, who wants 9/11 in Germany?”

Kramer admitted that Muslims were included in religious dialogue only after 9/11 – and not so that Jews and Christians could stage theological debates or find common causes with Muslims. The traditional religious cultures of Germany now had no choice but to recognize Islam as both a growing social and political power and a cultural and ideological threat.

As Germans began to see a minority culture they previously had chosen to ignore, Turks and Arabs were no longer Turks and Arabs: Everyone who fit the profile became a Muslim, no matter how little he or she actually associated with the faith. Now, immigrants from the Middle East felt pressure to represent Islam. At the very least, it made Germany stop ignoring them.

“Many people started considering themselves Muslim after 9/11,” said Paul R  ther, of the *Werkstatt der Kulturen*, a community center for cultural minorities in Berlin. “They didn’t think about it before. They would never call themselves Muslim, but then they were forced to do so.”

At first, Germans expressed sympathy toward Muslims, R  ther said. But as political rhetoric made “Islam” synonymous with “extremism,” attitudes changed. Suddenly, Muslims had to prove their innocence in the public arena.

“They needed to present themselves as just people,” R  ther said.

And so, Muslim organizations built mosques that actually looked like mosques, where the practices of Islam were put on display. Previously, all but a few of Berlin’s 80 mosques were simply gathering rooms in the back of homes, shops or restaurants. Because these places weren’t obvious places of prayer, Germans got nervous when a dozen Turks would gather in a back room at night and do who-knows-what. The mosques, like the newfound Muslim spirituality, were meant to present Islam to Berlin as non-threatening.

But non-Muslims often ignore those efforts, characterizing the Islamic culture of Berlin as a monolithic, alien force trying to take over the world, ignoring the fact that Turkish Shiites, Turkish Alevis, Arabs and Kurds all fought among themselves. Of Germany’s 80 or 90 Muslim groups, not one could be designated as a leader or representative, because each group stood for something different.

Nevertheless, Christians and Jews knew that Muslims, even without a central leader, had to be included in the religious discussion.

As a professor of religious studies at the Free University of Berlin,

Hartmut Zinser has gained a reputation as a man of science.

A wall-sized bookshelf with textbooks and journals and piles of writings and research materials fill his office. Some of the works are ones he has written, like his research book on new religious movements or his surveys of Berlin’s religious landscape.

Over his 20-plus years of studying religion in Germany, Zinser has developed relationships with each of the city’s religious communities and now is frequently invited to be a scientific participant in Germany’s interfaith dialogue meetings.

No one is more disheartened by these talks than he is.

“I have, from all these inter-religious discussions, the impression that one goes there because one has to,” he said. “One speaks and does not hear what the other says and waits for the moment to speak and then leaves afterwards.”

The modern era of interfaith dialogue in Germany originated with American occupation in the 1950s. Authorities from the United States thought it important to force Germans and Jews to educate each other about their respective religions and cultures in order to prevent further violence against religious minorities.

For more than 40 years, those talks remained healthy and beneficial. After reunification, though, relationships began to crumble.

Now, despite the effort each religious group puts into organizing talks and promoting cooperation among religions, very little gets done in areas where understanding matters most.

In recent years, religious talks have struggled from misunderstanding and relentless positioning for power in Berlin. Largely, the conflicts erupt between Christians and Muslims, who both want full rights and freedom to practice and spread their religions while not necessarily recognizing the rights and freedoms of the other. Meanwhile, the Jews participate while maintaining a calculated distance.

Zinser said talks get even more complicated when groups within religions disagree. Certainly Christianity is divided – not only between Catholics and Protestants, but among Lutherans, Reform, Free Christians and others. Because the church is a quasi-governmental organization, plenty of bureaucracy surrounds even the simplest decision. Churches inadvertently drove away members tired of slow responses and meaningless declarations that never truly addressed important issues.

R  ther, who often works with minority Muslim populations to get them political attention, gets the same impression about today’s interfaith relationships. With Christian leaders often dominating the conversation, nothing meaningful gets said by or about Muslim or Jewish issues. Therefore, non-Christians often choose not to participate.

But some Christians argue that Muslims’ actions don’t necessar-

ily deserve support from Christian churches. Uwe Siemon-Netto, a German and a Lutheran theologian now living in St. Louis, formerly covered religion for German newspapers and said he has seen Muslims walk around spitting on meat in sausage stands and butcher shops. He's also aware of imams who freely pass out Korans to Christian leaders but reject Bibles given in return. Now, more than ever, Siemon-Netto argues, Christians should not relinquish their beliefs.

"The Muslim attitude toward Christianity is exceedingly arrogant," he said. "I have come to the conclusion that most Muslims do not really want to cooperate. They are determined to take over, and if Christians are weak, if their practice is weak and they behave like idiots, then they are only pouring oil on the fire of the Muslims."

Meanwhile, Jewish talks with Muslims are often political peace-making gestures, not serious discussions about solving the issues of religious discrimination or interfaith education. The Jewish and Muslim faiths have much in common to fight for, including rights for circumcision and kosher food. The two groups have talked about cooperating to push agendas, but talk is cheap: It sounds great on the evening news whether or not genuine intentions support it.

For many Muslims, these attitudes discourage future talks. Bulut, the Sehlik imam, said his experiences with non-Muslim leaders rarely produce results, leading him and others to ignore non-Muslims completely.

"There is good acceptance from some German people, but you cannot generalize it," he said. "We get some positive energy from the other sides, but we don't really expect anything from them. That's why we just do what we should do and don't look to the other ones."

Islamic leaders aren't the only ones with communication issues. Christians and Jews have their problems with sincerity, too. Zinser said Christians will often simply accept whatever Jewish leaders want because they don't want to seem anti-Semitic.

"Christians and Jews have to get along well. Every Christian has to be pro-Jewish," R  ther said. "There is no possibility for anything else. So whenever the church officials say anything, it must be pro-Jewish. It doesn't have to be pro-Muslim."

Nothing infuriates Kramer more.

Instead of just going along with what he says, Kramer wishes those in the community would discuss issues with him. Just because he's Jewish and his people have suffered doesn't mean he's automatically right. But, more often than not, that's how other religious leaders treat his opinions.

Kramer knows the talks go nowhere, and he grows tired of them. Instead of starting any real discussion, he just tries to keep things civil.

"We have a frozen peace in those groups," he said. "I refuse to attend anymore because I'm getting into fights unnecessarily. We have del-

egates who go occasionally. We're there and everything, but ...."

Zinser said these petty issues of politics and semantics often get in the way of real progress, such as addressing discrimination and religious violence or deciding how to educate the public and introduce religion in schools. From the confusion and animosity come objections to new mosques in Berlin or accusations by right-wing neo-Nazis that Jews get special treatment. Religious ignorance continues, and common people suffer in the name of Jehovah, Jesus or Allah.

But talk continues anyway. Not talking would surely mean political suicide.

"It's good behavior to talk to other people," Zinser says sarcastically. "Everyone pretends to be open for talks, but that's not true. They're ambivalent."

From his experiences with inter-religious dialogue, Zinser knows the problems between Muslims, Jews and Christians go deeper than religious belief.

Zinser estimated from his studies that, across all religions, more than half of Germans are completely uninterested in religion, even if they identify with an organized religion. Another fifth participate in religion out of habit or family tradition, and only a tenth show genuine religious interest.

Considering that most Berliners who identify with one of the three main faiths don't actively practice, some factors other than religion must drive violence and hate-filled rhetoric from even moderate Germans. In these conditions, the implications of cultural peculiarities cannot be overlooked.

But it's important to understand that religion cannot be viewed simply as a byproduct of culture. On the contrary, religion sometimes is culture, as in the case of Islam. For most Germans, and most of the Western world, religion is no longer the driving force behind one's culture, but it is often the historical basis. One can't deny that Christianity and Judaism shaped modern Europe's social and moral values. Despite secularism and the idea of a post-God world, Western ethics all have roots in the Old and New Testaments.

Today, however, religious belief may be less responsible for conflict than socio-economic factors and cultural identity.

"It's a difference of social class and nationality," Zinser said.

R  ther seemed to agree, saying that tensions stem from national origin and ignorance of "the other" and citing culture clashes even within Berlin's Muslim communities.

"There's lots of problems between even Turkish and Kurdish people," he said. "They just project their local troubles from Turkey into exile in Berlin. And there's trouble between right-wing Germans and all kinds of groups, which is particularly strong in East Berlin. But it's

coming into the West as well.”

Viewed in this light, Berlin’s religious conflicts and, for that matter, religious conflicts around the world seem a bit more understandable. Hating people for their beliefs might not make much sense, but hating them because their way of life disrupts one’s native way of life, though not excusable, makes more rational sense and might be a better starting point for solving conflicts.

Perhaps Christians don’t have as many problems with Muslims as Germans do with Turks and Arabs and vice versa. Perhaps Jews receive better treatment than members of other faiths not because their religion is now accepted but because people of other faiths still feel the guilt of the Holocaust. Perhaps Jews abstain from discussion not because they disagree with Christianity and Islam but because they are weary of dealing with two cultures who share equally anti-Semitic histories.

Räther thinks this might be the case, and he offered no real solution to the conflicts – yet. But education, he said, is the first step.

For Muslims, specifically immigrant Muslims, the key lies not only in teaching Germans about Islam but also in teaching Turks about Germany.

“We are all of the opinion that if you live in a different country, you have to learn their culture and learn their language without giving up your own culture and your own language,” Bulut said. “We want to integrate but not assimilate, because the world is for all of us. The sun shines on all of us. We breathe the same oxygen.”

Kramer, too, knows reaching out to mainstream Germans will bolster community relations more than any religious talks ever will. The fight is against extremism, racism and bigotry, not against Christians and Muslims.

“It starts with the evening dinner table with Mommy and Daddy making a discriminatory joke,” he said. “After the joke comes the whole process that goes on and goes on and maybe ends with, ‘Hey, why don’t we put them all in prison and after that burn them all up?’”

Some people have already reached out to educate, like Aycan Demirel, a resident of Berlin’s largely Turkish Kreuzberg neighborhood, and Rabbi Henry Brandt. A Muslim himself, Demirel started a campaign in November 2006 to fight anti-Semitic rhetoric from Turks and Arabs in Berlin. In 2005, Germany’s Central Islamic Council honored Brandt with an award for promoting religious understanding – the first award from a German Islamic group given to a Jewish theologian.

German media outlet *Deutsche Welle* reported in March 2007 that Mina Ahadi, an Iranian-born Muslim now in Cologne, established the National Council of Ex-Muslims, an organization meant to combat Middle Eastern stereotypes and prove not all people from Mus-

lim backgrounds are fundamentalists.

But arguments and violence persist, and, some say, still worsen. Shortly after creating her organization, Ahadi received dozens of death threats and was assigned a police bodyguard. In May 2006, a neighborhood organization in East Berlin objected to yet another proposed mosque, saying the building would increase traffic and lower property values. In December 2006, Jewish leaders in Berlin reported that violence against young Jews had become a daily occurrence in the streets of the city. A few months later, a neo-Nazi group attacked a Jewish school with gas and graffiti, raising fears and concerns of growing extremism.

In addition, *Deutsche Welle* reported in April 2007 that four major Muslim organizations in Germany will organize into one large advocacy group, the Muslim Coordination Council. The group hopes to increase the German Muslim political and social presence. It’s considered an accomplishment by Islamic leaders but a threat by many other Germans.

Religious leaders and experts hold out hope that the people of Berlin will eventually accept their differences, but if education is the key to this acceptance, then the religious communities of the city still have a long road ahead.

Back in the Sehlik mosque, evening prayer is over. As he leaves the building, Bulut locks the gate behind him, securing the mosque and cemetery behind a 12-foot wall. Across town at the New Synagogue, armed guards stand outside to deter would-be attackers, just as they do at every Jewish or pro-Israel institution in Berlin.

Religiously, the city might be at peace for now, but culturally, it’s on edge.

Bulut said he still holds out hope that cultural groups in Berlin can work out differences. They don’t have to agree, he said, but they do need to live without fear of one another.

“There will always be some trouble-makers or some fights, but our aim is to reduce it to a minimum,” Bulut said. “Both countries [Germany and Turkey] have to do a lot of work to live here friendly and to solve these problems. I am of the opinion that not all of the problems will get solved, but it’s getting them on the minimum so we can live here, without fighting, with peace, so we can respect each other and all live here.”

Kramer is less optimistic about the future of relationships between religious groups, but, like Bulut, he said he will continue to do what he can to keep conflict to a minimum.

“My problems are not with those 10 or 15 percent anti-Semites,” Kramer said. “I will not convince them, not even if I take my whole life sitting in front of them. [My problem] is with the majority that is silently standing aside listening. If we do not oppose those Nazis openly on stage and de-mask them with arguments – clear, under-



standable arguments – at least one out of three of these silent bystanders will think, ‘Maybe he’s right. Maybe these Nazis are right,’ and that’s dangerous.”

As Berliners still struggle with the political and social turmoil of the last 60 years, Germans feel most comfortable with Germans, Turks with Turks, Jews with Jews, Russians with Russians and Arabs with Arabs. Often, the people in one of these groups know only one or two things about the people in the others: the religion they follow and the problems it seems to cause. Until social and political understanding expands, Berlin could continue to face these religious and cultural problems. But if Berliners can work out their differences, then maybe hope exists for Mexican and American, Shiite and Sunni, Israeli and Palestinian.

In fact, some say that of all cultural elements, religions could have the most in common. Faith in a higher power and belief in a set of morals are universal human qualities, and though the faiths and morals differ, they commonly exist to achieve the same ends – peace, love and understanding.

“There is no strong tension between the religions as religions,” R  ther said. “There are tensions among people as people, and that’s where we have problems.”

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