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## **On the (In)compatibility of Islamic Religiosity and Citizenship in Western Democracies: The Role of Religion for Muslims' Civic and Political Engagement**

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**Abstract:** Questioning the compatibility of Islam with liberal democratic principles has become a common argument in the public rhetoric across the socio-political spectrum. This article examines this claimed irreconcilability through the prism of a constitutive dimension of healthy democracies: active citizenship. Drawing on a systematic synthesis of recent studies, the article argues that, while it is impossible to ultimately decide whether Islam as a faith is compatible with liberal democratic norms, the lived religiosity of most Muslims is generally not an obstacle to civic engagement in non-Muslim majority countries; active involvement in mosques rather tends to enhance their active citizenship. Data from an explorative study on Muslims' engagement in Australia and Germany allow new insights into the different ways civically active Muslims refer to their faiths as driver for their citizenship. Some describe it as a religious duty, while for others 'serving humanity' constitutes a fundamental aspect of lived religiosity.

### **INTRODUCTION**

It has become a common argument in the public rhetoric across the West to claim that the Islamic faith is inherently incompatible with liberal democratic values, and thus constitutes a cultural threat to society and the political community (Cesari 2013, 6–7; Morgan and Poynting 2012). Such allegations are expressed blatantly and overtly at the far-right political spectrum to legitimize an exclusivist

Islamophobic agenda. But they have also penetrated segments of the public discourse across the political and societal mainstream in many Western countries, where they are usually articulated more subtly.

Public opinion echoes this rhetoric. Significant parts of the population express reluctance to fully accept Muslims as equal citizens, questioning the compatibility between what they consider to be Islamic norms, on the one hand, and often blurrily defined Western liberal values (Stratton 2016), on the other. Jones and colleagues found in their representative survey in the United States that almost one half of their respondents think that “Islamic values are incompatible with the American way of life” (Jones et al. 2006, 26). A decade later, a representative Pew Research Center survey revealed that 44% of respondents in the US (United States) think that there is a “natural conflict between Islam and democracy” (Lipka 2017). Attitudinal studies across Western societies, from Europe to Australia, have found similar views among substantial segments of the society (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2012). A cross-European survey by Zick and colleagues, for example, showed that in many European countries a majority consider Islam to be a “religion of intolerance,” and only a minority agree that “Muslim culture fits well” into their country (Zick, Küpper, and Hövermann 2011, 61).

Muslims themselves predominantly deny such a conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a Western society (Pew Research Center 2006). Studies have consistently illustrated that the vast majority of them have no problem reconciling their faith with their civic identity in a modern Western democracies (Jakubowicz, Collins, and Chafic 2012; Environics Institute 2016), and a recent survey among Muslims in Sydney found that most of them consider Islam to be “consistent with Australian values” (Dunn et al. 2015, 30). Empirical evidence even indicates that highly religious Muslims are particularly likely to regard Islamic teaching to be compatible with Western democratic values (Dunn et al. 2015, 32) or, as a recent US study showed, with political participation (Dana, Wilcox-Archuleta, and Barret 2017, 23). Overall, most Muslims in the West seem to reject the claimed incompatibility of their faith with the normative framework of liberal democracies.

Where does the widespread accusation of incompatibility come from when most Muslims themselves disagree with its basic tenet and seem to demonstrate the opposite through their lived experiences as “ordinary,” law-abiding citizens in the West? The most prevalent arguments revolve around Muslims’ (alleged) stance on certain liberal values and freedoms, often in the context of gender roles and equality, the boundaries of free speech and sexual minority rights. Various studies indeed confirm that Muslims display, on average, more conservative views on, for example, the role of women, homosexuality, or abortion (Smerecnik et al. 2010; Environics Institute 2016; Kalmijn and Kraaykamp 2017). These attitudinal pattern, however, often strongly resemble the prevalent views among other sub-

groups in Western democracies, like certain Christian denominations (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009) or other “traditionalists” predominantly at the center-right and the far-right end of the political spectrum. These conservative non-Muslim groups (some of whom, ironically, tend to be particularly vocal in claiming Islam’s incompatibility with liberal democratic values) do not face the same level of scrutiny and accusations of cultural separateness and incompatibility; their belonging and citizenship is not being discredited in the public discourse although they share similar views. Hence, it appears questionable as to whether Muslims’ conservative stance on the *unfinished* project of progressive liberalism in the West (e.g., persistent gender inequality, anti-gay sentiments) offers sufficient support for the claim that the Islamic faith is inherently incompatible with liberal democratic values.

In this article, I propose an alternative approach to explore the contested terrain of (in)compatibility between “lived Islam” and democratic norms by focusing on a less attitudinal and more behavioral manifestation of being a citizen in a liberal democracy: Muslims’ civic and political participation. Is there any empirical evidence that suggest that Muslims feel discouraged or prohibited by their faith to actively perform their democratic citizenship? Or does Islamic religiosity have no, or possibly even positive, effects on their volunteering in civil society and their political participation? These are meaningful questions to examine the reconcilability between Islamic and democratic values as they go to the core of Western participatory democracies, which require citizens to care about the wellbeing of others and become actively involved in the political process. As Robert Putnam and others have consistently argued, it is not only political participation that is crucial for healthy democracies but also civic engagement and community volunteering that “makes democracy work” (Putnam 1993; Halman 2003).

Given the diversity of Muslim communities in the West and the complexities of Islamic doctrines, sects, schools of thought and, above all, Muslims’ individual Islamic spirituality, it seems, however, unfeasible to ultimately answer these questions once and for all. Instead of focusing on the Islamic faith as a rigid system, based on a literate reading of Quranic sources, which, like other religious scripts (e.g., the Bible), clearly contains norms that are hard to reconcile with modern democratic values, it might be more insightful to explore Muslims’ *lived religiosity* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The growing number of practicing Muslims who have pursued a political career in the West or become active in civil society, but also the millions of Muslims who participate in general elections across Western countries, for example, suggests that being Muslim is not an obstacle to active citizenship. For these people, their Islamic faith does not seem incompatible with democratic principles. On the other hand, there is no doubt that segments (supposedly at the fringes) of Muslim communities do pursue a rigid, sometimes

even aggressively exclusivist, agenda, advocating against participation in society and the political system of liberal democracies, rejecting the principles of civil liberties, equality and secularism as well as partaking in the political system of a non-Sharia based state. Groups, like *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, for example, have openly expressed their opposition to secular and liberal democratic principles, which puts their political-religious activism at odds with core values of Western societies.

Acknowledging this complexity across highly diverse Muslim communities, this article synthesizes empirical evidence on the relationship between Muslims' religiosity and their civic and political participation in the West. It argues that there is little support for the "divergence" allegations that Islamic values are inherently incompatible with, and thus hampering, active citizenship in the lived experience of Muslims in the West. To the contrary, studies found that Islamic beliefs and practices are often positively associated with greater levels of civic engagement and political participation ("convergence hypothesis"). In a second step, I discuss the findings of a qualitative comparative study on Muslims' experiences and motives of active citizenship in Australia and Germany, which offers fresh empirical insights into the different ways in which Muslims interpret their faith as a civic resource and motivational driver for their citizenship performance in Western democracies.

## **ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP**

Active citizenship is a key concept in this article. While there is no unanimous consensus on what exactly active citizenship encompasses, the term is generally used to convey an understanding of citizenship that emphasizes the dynamic aspects of performative processes rather than the static aspect of holding equal legal rights. This is in line with the prevalent conceptualization of citizenship in contemporary scholarship as well as political discourses that highlight the procedural enactment of citizenship through civic and political participation in liberal democracies (Isin and Turner 2002; Bellamy 2010). Such a notion of citizenship does not only reflect a specific analytical perspective applied in theory and empirical research, but also bears a strong normative dimension as healthy liberal democracies require, as many scholars and politicians have noted, an active citizenry. Sir Bernard Crick (2008, 18), for example, maintains that "Democracy depends on all of us: the price of liberty is not just "eternal vigilance," as Abraham Lincoln said, but "eternal activity." Jan van Deth (2013, 9) puts it bluntly: "Democracy doesn't deserve its name without citizens' participation," and Chantal Mouffe has argued for many years along similar lines: "A radical, democratic citizen must be an active citizen, somebody who *acts* as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking" (Mouffe 1992, 4; emphasis in original).

Although the term “active citizenship” has become popular in research, it has remained conceptually vague. This article refers to a pragmatic definition proposed by Hoskins and Mascherini (2009, 462) in the European context: Active citizenship means “participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterized by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy.” Accordingly, participation in the sense of civic engagement, as defined by Adler and Goggin (2005), encompasses a range of formal and informal activities, carried out as member of an organization or independently, within the sphere of a particular community, broader civil society or the political arena through which citizens seek “to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (Adler and Goggin 2005, 240). In principle, the possibilities of enacting citizenship are infinite as “activist citizens” constantly create new “scenes” and “scripts” for the performance of “acts of citizenship” (Isin 2008, 38; Isin and Nielsen 2008), which has made it increasingly difficult to draw a clear line between community-based volunteering and political participation (van Deth 2013).

This understanding of active citizenship conveys a notion of civic and political engagement that is closely tied to the “democratic health” of a society. Without political involvement, even if this only means casting your vote in general elections, the legitimacy of a representative democracy is dwindling. Moreover, many scholars, most prominently, Putnam (2000), have made the Tocquevillian argument that civic engagement and community volunteering play a key role in maintaining and fostering citizens’ democratic values, civic skills and social trust (Halman 2003). Thus, citizens’ active involvement in voluntary community groups is seen as vital for strengthening civil society as the “third sector,” empowering citizen to take responsibility for their own concerns and to hold governments accountable. In Putnam’s famous words, it “makes democracy work” (Putnam 1993).

## **ON THE COMPATIBILITY OF ISLAM AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP: THEORETICAL REMARKS**

Although this is not a theological article, it is worth presenting some brief remarks on whether the Islamic faith, from an Islamic theological point of view, constitutes an obstacle to active citizenship, hampering Muslims’ civic and political participation in non-Muslim societies. Or, more broadly, in Tariq Ramadan’s (2013, 163) words: “Do the Islamic sources allow a Muslim to be a genuine European citizen.”

These are key questions within the Islamic jurisprudence *fiqh al aqalliyyat al-Muslema*, which has gained prominence since the late 1990s, also thanks to the prolific contributions of influential

Islamic scholars such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi and the late Taha Jabir Al-Alwani. This emerging Islamic jurisprudence seeks to provide religious guidance specifically tailored to those Muslims who live in non-Muslim societies, taking into account the specific circumstances in the West (see also Shavit 2015). Overall, proponents of *fiqh al aqalliyyat* argue against the rigid geo-political differentiation between the *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam) and *dar-al harb* (abode of war) (Kazemipur 2017). Jabir Al-Alwani (2004, 28), for example, argues that any land in which a Muslim can practice his religion freely becomes *dar al-Islam*, which has implications for the permissibility of a range of behaviors, including civic and political participation and interaction with non-Muslims.

Andrew March (2009) undertook one of the to-date most comprehensive analysis of various classical and contemporary traditions and scholars of Islamic jurisprudence to answer this question, exploring the Rawlsian “overlapping consensus of Islam and liberal citizenship.” His approach was three-fold: First, he asked if it is permissible for devout Muslims, according to Islamic doctrines, to reside permanently in non-Muslim states. Second, he examines the question of Muslims’ loyalty to a non-Muslim state (March 2009, 263). Third, he analyzed various Islamic doctrines with regard to Muslims “duty to recognize the equality of [all] citizens ... and to accept the bonds of solidarity arising from social cooperation, which may include participating in the political processes” (Idem 2009, 262).

March mentions some Islamic scholars and traditions that do reject the permissibility of all three dimensions — residence in and loyalty to a non-Muslim state, as well as solidarity and participation. He underscores, however, that these readings of Islamic sources constitute a minority position within Islamic jurisprudence. They stand in contrast to the majority of Islamic doctrines, including many classical and conservative ones, that argue for permissibility, desirability or the duty to obey the law of the land, show respect, solidarity and loyalty, and contribute to the wellbeing of all citizens. March (2009, 260) concludes: “The results of this investigation into Islamic foundations of citizenship in non-Muslim states give us surprisingly strong reasons to be optimistic about the prospects of such a doctrine.”

This conclusion resonates with Tariq Ramadan’s work on Muslim citizenship in Europe. Ramadan (2013) goes one step further, framing active citizenship not only as religiously permissible, but desirable and expected. This becomes most explicit in his elaborations on “action and participation” as a fundamental dimension of Muslim identity (Idem 2013, 195). He argues that ““to attain to faith” is often, and almost essentially, linked in the Qur’ān to the fact of behaving in a good way, of “doing good works”” (Idem 2013, 194), regardless of the environment or country one resides. This includes, among others, “to act for more justice within each sphere of social, economic and political life” and “to promote

solidarity with all types of needy people” (Idem 2013, 194). Similar to March, Ramadan highlights that this includes both Muslims and non-Muslims. Stressing the interpersonal and social dimension of enacting one’s faith as lived religion, Muslims have “the duty to strive towards participation, which clearly expresses the idea of acting with others, in a given society with fellow citizens that make it up” (Ramadan 2013, 195; see also Kazemipur 2017).

This theological snapshot confirms that there are too many different interpretations of Islamic sources, sects and groups to ultimately determine as to whether Islam *per se* prohibits, allows or even obliges believers to participate in civic and political life in the West. However, there appears to be a dominant reading of Islamic sources, even prior to the emergence of *fiqh al aqalliyyat*, that suggests that Muslim active citizenship — or at least certain manifestations — are permissible, if not encouraged by Islamic faith.

## **SYNTHESISING EVIDENCE: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ISLAMIC RELIGIOSITY AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP**

What does empirical research tell us about Muslims’ civic and political participation and the relationship between their faith and performed citizenship? While for many non-Muslim faith groups there is a broad consensus in scholarship about the positive effects of religiosity and, more specifically, religious attendance or affiliations on their civic and political engagement (Putnam and Campbell 2010; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), researchers have long ignored the specifics of Muslim communities and the Islamic faith. This empirical blind spot has started to diminish, however, over the past 10 years, initially in the US and, more recently, also in Australia and several European countries.

In the US, studies confirm that Muslims are as often involved in volunteering and other forms of community work as the national average. Read (2015, 39), for example, found in her national survey among 1,156 Arab Muslims that over one-half were “involved in school and youth programs and nearly three-fourth [were] involved in organizations for the needy — figures that mirror those found in the broader U.S. population.” The Pew Research Center (2016) survey Religion in Everyday Life revealed that one-third of Muslim respondents had done voluntary work in the seven days prior to the survey — the same proportion as among all respondents and slightly above those without any religious affiliations.

The degree of Muslims’ civic engagement in other Western countries is less conclusive. In Germany, for example, where previous research found below average volunteering rates among migrants of Turkish background (who are supposedly predominantly Muslims) (Halm and Sauer 2005),



a recent study revealed that 30% of surveyed Muslims were actively volunteering, compared to 38% among surveyed Christians and 27% among those without a religion (Nagel and El-Menouar 2017, 25).

In Australia, the official census data on formal volunteering show lower rates among Muslims (9.2%) compared with the general average (17.8%) (Peucker, Roose, and Akbarzadeh 2014, 295). However, there are reasons for cautious interpretation of such figures as the Australian Census defines volunteering in a rather formal way. This seems too narrow to capture the range of community engagement of many Muslims, who tend to “prefer a more informal and less bureaucratic approach to volunteering” (Madkhul 2007, 8) and often do not consider their ad-hoc community work a form of volunteering (Madkhul 2007, 27; Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia 2010, 38). This is supported by findings from surveys among Muslims in Melbourne (Monash University 2009) and Sydney (Dunn et al. 2015) that have revealed high volunteering rates among — predominantly very religious — Muslim respondents. Dunn et al. (2015, 37) found that over 36% of surveyed Muslims in Sydney had volunteered for a faith-based organization, 14% for a sporting association, and 49% had been engaged in fundraising activities over the past 12 months. A Monash University (2009, 46) study also detected high rates of active participation of Muslims in religious and various other Muslim and non-Muslim voluntary organizations (between 23 and 30%). Both surveys discovered that many Muslim respondents have also been politically active, from organizing or signing petitions and attending demonstrations to being involved in a political party.

Researchers have examined the correlation between Muslims’ civic engagement, on the one hand, and their subjective religiosity (e.g., personal importance of religion) or organizational religiosity (e.g., mosque attendance), on the other. In the United Kingdom, McAndrew and Voas (2014), analyzing data from the 2010 Ethnic Minority British Election Study, found a statistically significant correlation between Muslims’ subjective religiosity and both their civic engagement (e.g., in community or sports organizations) and volunteering in politics or community affairs. The more religious they were, the higher was their participation rate in voluntary organizations (Idem 2014, 111–112).

Read’s US study on Arab Muslims operationalized civic engagement through various forms of secular community activities (e.g., volunteered for, among others, school or youth programs, neighborhood groups, or organizations that help the poor, sick, or elderly). She found that those with high degrees of mosque participation (i.e., regularly attending and very involved) were significantly more likely to be civically active (Read 2015, 41). This association was particularly strong among Arab Muslim men. In contrast to McAndrew and Voas (2014), Read did not find a significant correlation between *subjective* religiosity and civic engagement. However, she emphasized that there was also no

negative association between both, which leads her to the conclusion that “Islam is not inherently restrictive of participation in American life” (Idem 2015, 41).

An Australian research team conducted a similar study (Vergani et al. 2017; Johns, Mansouri, and Lobo 2015), following Read’s methodology, with a sample of 96 Muslims from Melbourne. The results echo Read’s findings: “organized religiosity (i.e., religious practices organized by religious groups and institutions) is a statistically significant predictor of civic engagement among Muslims in Melbourne” (Vergani et al. 2017, 73). The correlation between Muslims’ subjective religiosity and civic engagement was not statistically significant (Idem 2017, 69) — although around 80% of respondents in this survey stated that their “religious and cultural beliefs and practices [often] help to make [them] a better citizen” (Johns, Mansouri, and Lobo 2015, 183).

These civically mobilizing effects of mosques have also been confirmed by Fleischmann, Martinovic, and Böhm. (2016), who examined the effects of religious service attendance among Muslims of Moroccan and Turkish origin in the Netherlands. They found that mosque attendance was significantly “related to participation in co-ethnic and mainstream organizations” (Idem 2016, 10), which, for Muslims of Turkish background, in turn increased their intention to vote in national or local elections (Idem 2016, 12). For Muslims of Moroccan origin, the link between mosque attendance and political participation was more indirect: Their participation in co-ethnic organizations correlated with increased political trust, which had a significantly positive effect on their political participation.

These findings not only confirm that Muslims who are active within their mosque community are more likely to be engaged also in non-Muslim voluntary organizations; they also point to the link between Muslims’ organizational religiosity and their inclination to *political* participation. Other studies have investigated this political mobilization of Muslims’ mosque attendance. Jamal (2005), for example, analyzed the association between mosque participation and civic and (non-electoral) political activities, drawing on a sample of 335 Muslims in New York. She found a statistically significant correlation between mosque attendance and political participation (e.g., contacting media or politicians, signing petition, political party member) only for Arab, but not for African American or South Asian Muslims. Another US study by Ayers and Hofstetter (2008), based on a national survey of 1,846 Muslims, concluded that Muslims’ religious commitment and resources (measured by their mosque attendance, prayers, and community volunteering) “was positively associated with increased political participation” (Idem 2008, 17–18). This is strongly supported by the findings of another recent US study, based on a survey of 1,410 Muslims: Muslims who were very involved in their mosque were more than 50% more likely to become politically active (e.g., attending community meeting or rally, write to political

officials) than those who were not involved in their mosque (Dana, Wilcox-Archuleta, and Barret 2017, 189). Similarly, a Swiss study among Muslims of Turkish, Maghreb, and former Yugoslavian background found that Muslims' active involvement in religious associations (but not in ethnic organizations) has a significantly positive effect on their political participation (Giugni, Michel, and Gianni 2014).

A British study confirms this political mobilization effects. British Muslims who frequently attend mosques are "more likely to engage in mainstream British politics given rates of engagement among British Muslims which are already high" (McAndrew and Sobolewska 2015, 69). Ayers and Hofstetter (2008) found, however, that *subjective* religiosity ("religious salience") reduce their disposition to political participation: "Religious beliefs consistently offset the positive influence of religious resources," they argue (Idem 2008, 18). What seems empirically well established is the mobilizing effect of mosque attendance (organizational religiosity) on Muslims' civic and political engagement. The role that Islamic faith (subjective religiosity) plays, however, remains empirically ambiguous in these quantitative studies.

## **QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS: ISLAMIC FAITH AS A DRIVER OF MUSLIMS' ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP**

March's (2007) examination of classical and contemporary Islamic jurisprudence conclude, and in line with the emerging *fiqh al aqalliyyat al-Muslema* by Islamic scholar like al-Qaradawi and Jabir Al-Alwani, that Muslims are *permitted* to reside in non-Muslim societies, interact with non-Muslims and actively participate within these non-Sharia based societies and political systems. According to this, Islamic teaching may call for "respect of the civic culture" (Dana, Wilcox-Archuleta, and Barret 2017, 194) of the Western society Muslim reside in, but Islamic doctrines do not *oblige* Muslims to become engaged, politically active citizens. Qualitative studies on Muslims' civic and political engagement in the West suggest, however, that many civically and politically active Muslims decide to go one step further, describing their faith as an important driver for their active citizenship.

A research team led by Anita Harris, for example, interviewed 80 Australian Muslims in Melbourne and Brisbane on their "everyday, 'ordinary' practices of civic engagement" (Harris and Roose 2014, 798). The majority of respondents articulated a "special obligation as Muslims to help others or make the community a better place" and felt that "being Muslim made a difference to the extent or kind of social or civic action they were involved in" (Idem 2014, 808). Harris and Roose (2014, 807) conclude that Muslims who regard their faith as a holistic and comprehensive "way of life"

tend to act as “ethical citizens whose everyday lives were always inflected by moral and political reflection and guidance for action. This could then enhance rather than reduce their capacity for civic engagement.”

Another Australian study on Muslims’ religiosity and civic engagement (Johns, Mansouri, and Lobo 2015; Vergani et al. 2017) reaches similar conclusions. Based on 49 interviews and several focus groups in Melbourne, the research team found that many Muslim participants viewed Islamic practices and beliefs as anything but a civic obstacle (Johns, Mansouri, and Lobo 2015, 186). To the contrary, civic engagement and volunteering was often described as being promoted or even mandated by Islam. Overall, these study findings indicate that, in the eyes of many civically committed Muslims, Islam urges them to get involved in “active forms of community engagement and service” (Vergani et al. 2017, 72). A clear distinction between religious norms, on the one hand, and democratic (secular) values around the promotion of social justice and human rights, on the other, is often hard to draw. Vergani et al. (2017, 72, emphasis in original) identify an “overlap between religious beliefs and active citizenship practice in a republican tradition, with its emphasis on striving for the *common good*.”

This resonates with the Mustafa’s (2016) ethno-graphic study on British Muslims’ active citizenship which uncovered a “recurring reference to faith and humanity as the moral compass guiding [their] active citizenship” (2015, 11). Both Mustafa’s (2016) and Vergani et al.’s (2017) study emphasize that these value-driven enactments of citizenship also encompass manifestations of dissenting citizenship (O’Loughlin and Gillespie 2012), where Islam — similar to the principles of deliberative democracies — promotes critical engagement, expressing disagreement with political decision, and holding the country’s political leaders to account.

## **THE SUBJECTIVE NATURE OF FAITH-DRIVEN MOTIVATION FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP**

The following elaborations draw on a cross-comparative study on Muslims’ civic and political participation in Australia and Germany. While not being statistically representative, the study findings confirm previous research that highlight: (a) the basic compatibility of the lived religiosity of the interviewed Muslims with democratic principle of active citizenship and (b) the significance of the Islamic faith as a driver of Muslim active citizenship. But the findings add to the current scholarship by offering original in-depth insights into the multifaceted ways in which Muslims, who are active in civil society, community life and the political arena, subjectively interpret their faith as a source of civic commitment and active citizenship.

The data for this study were collected in 2013 through in-depth interviews with 30 self-declared Muslims who have been active in different forms of civil and political participation in Australia and Germany. The key goal of the study was to explore how and why these active Muslims have become civically engaged, and how their civic careers have evolved over time. The rationale for the selection of the interview partners was to realize a purposive sample that reflects the diversity of Muslims in terms of both demographic markers and manifestations of active citizenship. For the latter, a systematic typology of performed citizenship was used to capture a maximum range of activities, covering all of the following.

- Formal and informal political as well as civic participation.
- Civic/political engagement within an organization as well as enacted independently without organizational affiliation (e.g., online blogger).
- Volunteer engagement within Muslim community organization (from conservative-orthodox to more progressive-liberal) as well as non-Muslim groups (e.g., political parties, trade unions, mainstream civil society organizations)
- Engagement characterized by a predominantly communitarian agenda (e.g., advancing Muslim community wellbeing) as well as pursuing “greater society” oriented (republican) goals (e.g., building a cohesive society)

Interview partners were identified based on the researcher’s previous knowledge of the Muslim community landscape in both countries and on additional online searches (e.g., for Muslim trade unionists, politicians; representatives of Muslims organizations). The realized sample for this explorative study encompasses all of the above mentioned manifestations of active citizenship, i.e., it included Muslims active within Muslim and non-Muslim community or other civil society organizations (e.g., trade unions) as well as within the mainstream political arena (e.g., active political party members, elected policymakers in local or state government). The majority of selected interview partners were involved, as it turned out during the interviews, in a range of different (often both Muslim and non-Muslim) groups and civic-political activities, most of them with a “common goods” oriented (republican) agenda; only very few pursued purely or mainly communitarian goals of advancing the wellbeing of Muslim communities. The sample was characterized by an even gender mix and a broad age range from early 20s to 80s as well as participants’ diverse ethnic-cultural origins with some of them having migrated themselves and others born in Australia and Germany respectively.

Interview themes revolved around, among others, goals, motives and drivers of their active engagement in community work, broader civil society and the political arena. Participants mentioned

their Islamic identity and faith in particular in two contexts: First, a number of interview partners described it as one of their civic goals to redress public misconceptions of Islam and Muslims. Some of them had become active with the explicit aim of correcting the skewed public image. Second, and more immediately related to the argument in this article, the majority of interviewed Muslims described their Islamic faith as their primary, or at least a very important motivational driver of their active citizenship.<sup>1</sup> It is important to stress that this applies not only to those civically active within a Muslim community context and those who pursued a communitarian agenda of advancing the wellbeing of the Muslim community. But Islamic faith was also described as a key driving force of active citizenship by many of those interviewed Muslims with a more republican, common-good oriented civic agenda and those active within a mainstream arena of civic and political participation (e.g., trade unions, political party).

Interviewed Muslims in both the Australian and the German sample spoke openly about their sense of being empowered or urged by their faith to contribute to society, help the poor and needy, and, in a few cases, to advance the wellbeing of fellow Muslims. On closer inspection, these personal accounts offer unprecedented insights into the different ways in which the Islamic faith serves as a civic motivational force. The data analysis, which did not pinpoint any major country-specific differences between Muslims in Australia and Germany, identified three often overlapping and interconnected arguments. First, Islam was described as a general source of strength and empowerment facilitating civic engagement; second, some interview partners regarded “serving others” as an inherent principle of lived religiosity in Islam; and third, many described active citizenship — sometimes rather defensively — as an act their faith obliges them to perform and they will be rewarded for by God.

### **Empowerment and Strength**

Several respondents elaborated that their Islamic faith gives them strength and purpose in life and drives their engagement. For them, Islam is a source of civic empowerment. A community activist, leading a Muslim women’s organization in Sydney, expressed this view very clearly:

If I didn’t have my faith and my Creator, I don’t think I would be able to overcome all the negative things ... And there are days when I think I can’t get up the next morning, and I’m not going to put myself out there anymore. And then you think and talk to Allah, the Creator, and you think: What is my purpose in this life? I have a purpose which is to make this world a better place, not only for me and my children, but for the future generation. So if this is my purpose, I better get up now, and I know God will send me people along the way who will support me. And that’s what keeps me going (55/f).

This echoes the accounts of an elected local councilor of Islamic faith in the German sample. He (45/m) also described Islam as a source of personal strength, linking it to his personal accountability before God in the afterlife: “My strength [for my civic-political involvement] I probably get somehow from my religion ... I believe in life after death ... When God then says: ‘You saw the problems, so what did you do about it?’ ... I then have to be able to provide an answer.”

### **Serving Humanity as a Principle of Lived Religiosity**

A number of interview partners explained their faith-driven motivation for their civic engagement and commitment in spiritual terms and with a reference to the fundamental nature of Islam — importantly, though, without mentioning a sense of obligation. A Melbourne volunteer (35/f) for a Muslim women’s organization, for example, stated that helping and “being useful to others,” both Muslims and non-Muslims, is “such a strong concept in Islam” — and her civic engagement is a reflection of this: “This is how I emanate that, this is how I show that — being a useful human being.” Another community activist from Melbourne (41/f) argued similarly. Her commitment to “serving humanity” and “her deep concern for humanity as a whole” is fundamentally driven by her endeavors to follow the example of the Prophet. For her, active engagement in cross-community dialogue and serving others is “the main path to connect with the Divine.” She said:

... the purpose of life is to know God. But how do we know God? Do you know God just through praying ... or fasting? You know God through his divine attributes ... God’s attributes are such as the all merciful, the compassionate, the all loving, the all forgiving (41/f).

There was no sense of religious obligation in the description of her motivation: “It’s definitely my calling. It is definitely my love and inspiration — serving others. Serving others is what I enjoy. It gets me out everyday.” In the German sample, a Muslim trade union activist (29/m) also alluded to the example set by the Prophet, drawing a link between basic Islamic values and the principles of the labor movement. He explained his tireless commitment to workers’ rights as follows:

The basic reason for my endeavors to improve working and living conditions is, of course, that the Prophet was also committed to working toward justice ... Justice and inclusiveness , [and] that all people get the same money for the same kind of work (29/m).

Another interview partner in the German sample, a civically and politically active university student (21/m), similarly argued along religious lines, comparing these Islamic norms with humanistic

principles. He stated: “Well, the motivation why I do all this has, of course, a religious background,” emphasizing that for him Islamic norms are identical with humanistic values. While he maintains that this is “something my religion wants” and that one will be rewarded for it, he also stressed his personal and deeply religious motivation by saying that “for me it is important to give, but what makes this important is that it is linked to God. The spirituality is very important.” Another interviewed Muslim in Germany (27/f), who has been active within a socialist youth group and Muslim community organization as well as in the local political arena, explained the driver behind her volunteering as being “part of living my religion. For me that’s not only praying, but being active, doing something for other people. That for me is about religion ... It’s kind of worship to be there for society.”

What these accounts have in common is that their civic engagement, striving for the wellbeing of others regardless of their religion, is portrayed as being inherent in their lived religiosity. It is not, or at least not primarily, described as a religious obligation — despite occasional references to God’s reward. In some cases, however, it appears difficult to clearly distinguish between this rather spiritual enactment of Islamic principles and a sense of religious duty.

### **Citizenship as a Religious Duty**

Many interviewed Muslims described their civic commitment as something desirable or even mandatory in their faith. One cannot simply live in a society and ignore the needs and concerns of their social environment, as many explained. An interview partner in the German sample, a chairman of a mosque and trade union activist (43/m), for example, stressed that “my faith makes me responsible for doing this, and that I take responsibility and do not simply accept things the way they are. That’s the reason for [my engagement].”

A Muslim university student from Sydney (28/m), active within a Muslim-led initiative that help socio-economically marginalized at-risk youth (e.g., drug use, criminality) in the local neighborhood, also framed the motives for his civic engagement in religious terms, referring to the Quranic verse “If you save one life, it is as if you saved all humanity.” He explains that his faith “teaches [him] to do this and to have passion, to be compassionate” and that “our Lord has instructed us to help the disadvantaged and give where you can.” The latter suggest a sense of religious obligation. He makes this more explicit during the interview when he mentioned that compassion is “intrinsically in me,” but “as a natural consequence of that,” he also seeks to gain credits for his good deeds to be rewarded by God in the afterlife.



Many interviewed Muslims mentioned this notion of collecting point or credits by doing good deeds in this life, which would be rewarded by God in the hereafter. But this Islamic “reward system” and the motivation to please God through active contribution to the wellbeing of others was interpreted in different ways. This ranged from an almost instrumentalist and sometimes rigid notion of following religious duties to a more flexible understanding of the Islamic principle of “doing good.”

A Sydney-based Muslim community activist (55/f), who has also been involved in a range of political advisory activities on local, state and national level, for example, stated that to please God you need to be “doing as best you can.” She alludes to the divine reward that drives her manifold civic engagement as follows:

I have this debit account. I don’t know what’s in it. It’s like entering into an exam and I think life itself is an exam ... You hope you will succeed ... you’re doing the best you can, not knowing what you are going to get in the end. This is what keeps me going, I don’t keep track, because it could be one little action that will elevate my being with my Creator and one big action that has no weight (55/f).

An interview partner from Melbourne (28/m), who has volunteered for a mosque, an Islamic student association and the umbrella organization Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV), argued along similar lines of not knowing as to whether he has done enough to please God. He stated that, “if you take a position [like at the ICV] ... you are accountable before people and God. There is an accountability process and there is always this fear that, maybe, you are not fulfilling it. That drives me and pushes me to work a lot.” Despite this “fear,” he emphasized the pleasure he gets out of doing community work:

I really enjoy it, the people and the community, but there is the doubt whether it is enough and sufficient, whether your intentions are clean ... It comes in as a doubt, but the engagement itself is very positive. I don’t do it as a burden (28/m).

A few interview partners interpreted this religious duty in a more defensive or instrumentalist way. A woman from Sydney (25/f), community engagement officer for a government-led initiative, described defending God and helping other Muslims as an “informal” obligation, referring to the Islamic reward system:

Everything I do is to get into heaven. That’s essentially every Muslim’s goal, every religious person’s goal ... It is definitely to score more points. I want God to see I’m doing this for his benefit and the benefit of our religion. And I’m trying to abide by this as much as I can. And it is always my end goal ... to please God and not anybody else (25/f).

Similarly, in the German sample, a long-standing Muslim community activist (47/f) stated that her community and interfaith work is about “paying her duty to thank the Creator for being healthy and well, and that my children are well. It is my duty to do this, collecting a few points ... I do this in order to stay well in the future.” And she continued:

The driving force for doing all this — sacrificing one’s own time, staying away from home sometimes on weekends, although your children need you — is of course God’s benevolence ... One collects good deeds, which you need in this life and in the afterlife (47/f).

Such a rather defensive interpretation of the Islamic obligation of helping the needy and contributing to society was an exception in this study. It was much more common among the interviewed Muslims to elaborate on how their civic engagement has given them personal pleasure and a sense of purpose and meaning in their life. The notion of gaining points or credits for one’s good acts to be rewarded by God in the afterlife was prominent among many interviewed Muslims. Civic engagement was, however, not merely a dutiful act before God, but rather a core aspect of one’s subjective religiosity that is experienced not alone through formal religious acts like praying and fasting, but in a holistic “comprehensive way of life,” as one interview partner described it.

## CONCLUSION

Is there a place for the Islamic faith in a liberal democracy? I have argued that the claim of (in)compatibility of Islam and liberal democracies can be investigated more constructively through the lens of Muslims’ civic and political performance in Western democratic societies and polities than by surveying their attitudes toward certain progressive liberal values. Does a member of a liberal democratic society, regardless of their religious beliefs, disqualify as a citizen because he or she disapproves of homosexuality and marriage equality or has certain views about where to draw the line between freedom of speech and religious incitement or insult? These remain contested themes in the liberal project of modern societies, and they do not appear well-suited as the ultimate yardstick for civic recognition and acceptance of Muslims (or others) nor are they suitable to support the claim that the Islamic faith as such is incompatible with liberal democratic values.

Instead of assessing the question of (in)compatibility on the basis of Muslims’ attitudes, this article proposed an alternative, and arguably more constructive, approach through an analysis of Muslims’ enactment of democratic citizenship in civil society, community life or the political arena. If Islam prohibited or discouraged Muslim’s engagement within civil and political life, this could be

interpreted as an indicator for Islam's incompatibility with democratic values. On a theological level, an ultimate answer to this question is hard to find. March's (2009) comprehensive analysis of classical and contemporary Islamic doctrines reminds us of the complex variety of readings of Islamic sources. There is little doubt that some of them fundamentally clash with Muslims' active engagement in Western liberal democracies — and the media pays disproportionate attention to these divisive and exclusivist voices from the fringes of the Muslim community (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 20014, 86–88). Such views are, however, neither reflective of the majority of Islamic doctrines and readings of the Quran (March 2009) nor are they shared by the majority of Muslims living in Western societies. Against this backdrop, the question as to whether the Islam faith as such is compatible or not with liberal democracies is essentialising and too simplistic to be answered theologically with a definite yes or no. Depending on the individuals' interpretation of their faith, Islam can be either a deterrent, irrelevant for, or a positive driver of active citizenship.

Looking at Muslims' everyday lives and their lived religiosity in the West, however, suggests that most Muslims in Western liberal democracies accept and appreciate their (and others') freedoms and rights; and only a minority seem to have difficulties reconciling their faith with their civic identity and sense of belonging to the society (Dunn et al 2015; Environics Institute 2016). Muslims might hold on average more conservative views, but empirical research indicates that their faith is not an obstacle to enacting their democratic rights and duties as active citizens and, ultimately, that the lived religiosity of the vast majority of Muslims *is* reconcilable with core democratic principles.

Instead of hampering Muslims' active citizenship, emerging research shows that Islamic religiosity and practice is often positively associated with Muslims' civic and political participation. Recent quantitative studies (Jamal 2005; Fleischmann, Martinovic, and Böhm. 2016; Read 2015) have consistently shown that Muslims who regularly attend and are active within mosques are significantly more likely to be also engaged in other non-Muslim civil society groups. In addition, this organizational facet of their religiosity has often been linked to increased political activism and trust (Fleischmann, Martinovic, and Böhm 2016; McAndrew and Sobolewska 2015; Ayers and Hofstetter 2008; Dana, Wilcox-Archuleta, and Barret 2017). These civically mobilizing effects can be considered well established in research. What remains empirically under-researched is the impact of Muslims' subjective religiosity on their citizenship. Recent qualitative studies (Mustafa 2016; Vergani et al. 2017; Harris and Roose 2014), including my own explorative research on civically and politically active Muslims, suggest that at least for most of those Muslims who are active in civil society or (Muslim and non-Muslim) community life their Islamic faith plays an important role as a motivational driver for their active

citizenship. Quantitative research findings on subjective religiosity has been inconclusive thus far, which calls for more — and more differentiated — empirical investigations of the link between Muslims' lived religiosity and their citizenship. It might be impossible to ultimately prove the compatibility or incompatibility between liberal democratic values and Islam as a faith due to the myriad of different, often competing, interpretations of Islam, but there is strong empirical evidence that, by and large, Muslims can be — and often are — “good” active citizens in liberal Western democracies.

## NOTE

1. While only very few interviewed Muslims described their civic engagement as being driven solely by their personality, unrelated to their religion, many explained that their personal commitment and values are deeply, often inextricably intertwined with their Islamic faith.

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