

A Visit to Muslims in Austria: Vienna and Vorarlberg

Marta Felicitas Khadija Galedary visited two Muslims communities in Austria: Vienna and Vorarlberg, in April 2008. The main objective of the visit was to dialogue with the Austrian Muslim community and exchange information about the way of living as a Muslims in the USA. A small group of 4 American Muslims met with a variety of Muslims and non Muslim leaders, professors and activists. The group was shocked to find out the poor conditions of the Muslim Turkish community living in Vorarlberg.

Statistics Muslims in Austria

There are approximately 340,000 Muslims in Austria, with 7.8 % living in Vienna. The majority are of Turkish descent (120,000), and Bosnians (about 50,000).

In Vienna Muslims are the second largest religious group, followed by Orthodox Christians and Protestants. The lowest percentages of Muslims live in Styria (1.6%) and Burgenland (1.4%).

History of Muslims in Austria After World War II

A law issued in 1867, guaranteed respect for all religions throughout the Austrian empire, and gave Muslims the right to establish mosques.

The country's first mosque was built in Vienna in 1878, with the government's assistance, to service Bosnian Muslims enlisted in the Austrian army.

New waves of Muslims immigrants entered the country following World War II, mostly skilled laborers from Turkey attracted to work in the country's reconstruction efforts.

The economic boom in Western Europe during the 1970's and the disintegration of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990's caused more immigration to Austria.

Present Conditions of Muslims living in Austria.

According to Dr. Doerler (liaison person among Christians and Muslims), after September 11, 2001 the condition of the Muslim community in Vorarlberg deteriorated.

There is a great salary disparity between Austrians and immigrants.

There is no second language service to improve the German language skills of immigrant children.

The segregation of Turks starts at an early school age, within the Austrian educational system. According to a local Turkish Muslim:

Austria's school system classifies the children since elementary school in two levels, which locked the students in two categories for future school placement. The criteria are based on the knowledge of the German language. Most of the children of the immigrant Muslim community will encounter a problem with proficiency in the German language.

Therefore, these students will never achieve a professional career because their lack of German language proficiency insures that they will be locked in the lowest classification. Even though immigrant students can master their knowledge of German, they will not be promoted to go to university level. These students will be eligible to attend a technical skills school only.

It is hard to believe that in the 21st century a modern European state and European Union member could discriminate so openly against immigrant residents. The extreme fundamentalist Christians and a neo-Nazi mentality are still present.

In order to understand the behavior and way of thinking of the Austrian society is necessary to go back to the history of the region:

1. According to the historian, Richard Jaklitsch, Christianization of the region started in the 7th and 8th centuries by Irish missionaries, led by [St. Columban](#), who came to spread the word of God.

The main figure associated with the ecclesiastical penetration of Austria was a Rhenish noble, [St. Rupert](#), who first came to Bavaria in **696** and who later chose Salzburg as his base for his Austrian mission.

It was in Salzburg that he founded the abbey of St. Peter (now a Benedictine house), considered by many the "mother church" of all Austria and Bavaria (Leeper 87). The conversion of Austria made swift progress, evident from the fact that the Pope elevated Salzburg to a bishopric.

The Roman Catholic Church possessed the power of the state, religion and wealth, for many centuries.

Austrian knights joined the First Crusade and participated in the conquest of Jerusalem. It seems that the "crusader" sentiment of some current Catholic bishops is still present.

2. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was engaged in major warfare with the Muslim Ottoman Turks from the 16th Century to the late 19th Century and did not end until the weak Ottoman Empire allied with the Germans during World War I. There is still historical resentment towards the Turks, who, during the time of the Ottoman Empire, unsuccessfully laid siege to Vienna twice – once in the 16th century and once in the 17th century.

3. Racism and Fascism are still present in Austria, 63 years after the defeat of Nazi Germany. Anti-immigrant sentiment simply feeds the resurgence of neo-Nazi and extreme right wing groups.

Visit to the Austrian State of Vorarlberg

According to the 2001 census 8.4 to 9 percent of the population in Vorarlberg is Muslim. Dornbirn is the largest city in the Austrian State of Vorarlberg, as well as its business and economic center, with its 45,650 inhabitants (2006)

Dornbirn benefits from its favorable location among diverse cultural and natural settings in the four countries area of Austria, the Principality of Liechtenstein, Switzerland and Germany.

The first Muslim Turks arrived in Vorarlberg

In the 1960's Austria invited "guest-workers" from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia. The workers were poorly educated, and many of them were illiterate.

Quoting Dr. Doerler on the issue of integration, she said: "Austrians and guest-workers, thought they were going back home soon, therefore, nobody worked for integration. No German language courses were offered. The problem is felt now with the youth." The young Turkish Muslims' have feelings of despair without an identity, no culture, low self-esteem, no voice in Austria's political system nor anyone who can speak for their civil rights. There is nobody to look up to, no winners, nor any role models.

The youth became assimilated and still NOT wanted

There are no tutoring services available to students who need to improve in any subject, especially in the German language

There are few job openings. The unemployment rate is about 40 percent.

The jobs are denied to applicants whose names sound Turkish.

Entry is denied to young Muslims in youth centers where the Austrians gather.

Reminiscent of the American South during the Jim Crow, pre-civil rights era, there are signs posted outside of buildings stating: No Turks Allowed.

Jobs and housing are regularly denied to a people whose names sound Turkish.

ATIB mosque (Austrian Turkish Islamic Union)

The ATIB mosque is the largest in Vorarlberg. The majority of members are of Turkish origin. The financial support comes from the members of the community.

In order to have an Imam, they followed the rules of the Vorarlberg government, which included a stipulation that the Imam must be approved by the Turkish government

Strict Rules to hire an Imam

The period of serving is 4 years; when the serving period ends, the Imam must return to Turkey. The Imam is paid by the Turkish government and by the local community

The Imam's activities include: teaching of Islam, visits to hospitals and jails and sometimes working as a social worker.

Struggle over Construction of a Minaret

Dr. Doerler mentioned that the Catholic Community is divided in two: the mainstream followers of the Pope's orders of Muslim acceptance, after Pope John Paul II acknowledged that the Qur'an was a holy book inspired by God.

The second group consists of Catholics who adhere to an ideology of "Defending Christianity against Orientalism-Islam."

Quoting scientists Kurt Greussin, "some Catholics' views are apocalyptic in the sense of defending Christianity from the Orient"

Quoting from the newspaper:

"A high ranking representative of Austria's Catholic Church for the first time openly voiced reservations against the construction of minarets. Austrian Bishop Condemns Minarets as a Provocation." Elmer Fischer, stated "mosques with minarets would be a provocation." Nowadays, the Muslim Turks are still fighting the right to build a minaret to the ATIB mosque.

Conclusion of the Dialogue in Vorarlberg

- The poor condition of the Muslim community in Vorarlberg might lead to a phenomenon of resentment and anti-social behavior from the younger generation. The major critique from Catholic fundamentalists is to put the blame on Islam. The Muslims have already been labeled as violent people.
- There is a resurgent racism, supported by the fundamentalist Catholics, many of whom identify with the Opus-Dei movement, against the Muslim community.
- The Catholic fundamentalists have a powerful influence in the government and the media, often denigrating and stereotyping Muslims.

- The Austrian authorities complain about the inability of Muslims to integrate into society, while, at the same time, they have segregated the Muslim community from interacting with the rest of the society. The young generation of Muslims appears to be losing their identity and religion, without successfully assimilating.

- In the end, they are still not wanted.