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## Politics of the Margins: Germany's Salafi and Progressive Muslims Redefine the Mainstream

2 October 2025

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The public conversation about Islam in Germany often simplifies its complexities, overlooking the vibrant and at times clashing internal discussions within Muslim communities. Our recent study, ['Islam at the Margins: Salafi and Progressive Muslims Contesting the Mainstream in Germany'](#), which was published in the journal *Religions*, offers a novel comparative analysis that highlights the surprising similarities between two seemingly opposing movements: ultra-conservative Salafism and progressive, LGBTQI+-inclusive Muslim groups. What makes this research particularly insightful is its direct comparison within a European context—a juxtaposition rarely explored before.

Our ethnographic data collected in Germany, reveals the ways in which marginalised groups negotiate their religious identity and practice, often in direct opposition to what they perceive as mainstream Islamic authorities (represented by well-established organisations such as the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DİTİB)), a body that operates over 900 mosques in Germany. While on the surface, Salafis and progressive Muslims appear to be poles apart, the study found intriguing moments of convergence in their strategies for challenging the status quo and gaining public prominence.

### The Shared Experiences of Alienation: Driving Affiliation at the Margins

A key finding of the research is that individuals within both Salafi and progressive Muslim groups often share a common biographical thread: a sense of alienation or exclusion from mainstream mosques and institutions. This feeling, though stemming from different reasons, propels them towards these alternative as well as marginalised groups.

For many Salafis, the mainstream is perceived as overly bureaucratic, culturally entrenched, or compromised by ties to foreign states. [The story of Ibrahim](#), a German Muslim from a Turkish family, who left his "family mosque" after a conflict with the Imam, exemplifies a rejection of traditional institutions in search of a "purer" and more authentic expression of Islam. This quest is particularly strong among German converts, who, as one former Salafi leader noted, "grew up without any fear of the German state" and feel empowered to advocate for Muslim rights more assertively, aiming for a ["culture- and tradition-free Islam"](#). There are even instances of converts, like Sascha, a 30-year-old business consultant, critiquing what they see as "ethnic Islam" within migrant communities, yearning for "more German Muslims."

Conversely, progressive Muslims experience alienation from the mainstream due to its perceived rigidity and lack of inclusivity. One interviewee, a convert in her mid-40s, recounted feeling uncomfortable when her headscarf shifted during prayer, leading to immediate adjustments from others. While seemingly minor, these moments contribute to a feeling of "ongoing alienation". More serious experiences are reported by queer Muslims, who often face explicit marginalisation and discrimination in established mosque environments. As a coordinator of a liberal community put it, "queer Muslims have no opportunity at all to live their queerness and religiosity in other communities, you can forget it!" Progressive groups, like the [Liberal-Islamic Federation \(LIB\)](#), offer an alternative; they aim to provide a "free space" for a more open theology adapted to modern circumstances, where, as one coordinator said, "almost everyone in our communities agrees that...there is a disagreement with the traditionalist...offer." This indicates an active membership seeking new religious answers.

### The Politics of Labels: Contesting Narratives and Identities

The study highlights how labels are powerful tools in defining and contesting identities within the German Islamic field, with both groups navigating external stigmatisation and internal self-definition. Salafi actors often feel misrepresented by the "Salafi" label, which in public discourse is frequently associated with extremism and anti-constitutional views. They often use alternative terms to describe themselves, emphasising their commitment to what they perceive as the "pure," "authentic," and "original" form of Sunni Islam. Interestingly, some Salafis have even re-appropriated these negative labels as a "badge of honour," finding a "gratifying fame" in the negative press, though this approach has faced internal critique. The internal debates and their attempts to "defuse the threat content" of the label clearly reveal their struggle to control their own narrative.

Similarly, liberal Muslims critically examine external labels and their self-designations. While "liberal" is a central term, its equation with "progressive" is not without controversy, with some viewing it as a "combative term" or associating it with undesirable market liberalism. Despite this, the label serves as a clear distinction from established Islamic structures. Their reference points include Liberal Judaism, which successfully formed its own liberal-religious communities and reformed religious practices, particularly concerning women's roles. Criticisms from within Islam, such as the accusation of "dilution of Islamic content" or even questioning if they "want to certify swingers clubs as halal?", illustrate the challenges they face in being taken seriously by more traditional factions. However, a softening of conservative positions has been noted, partly due to German public discourse and state funding favouring liberal-religious attitudes.

### From Confrontation to Pluralisation

Our research meticulously details the distinct, yet often parallel, strategies employed by Salafi and progressive Muslims to challenge mainstream institutions.

Salafi movements often engage in mutual vilification with mainstream Islamic actors, stemming from theological differences and power struggles. They critique established associations for prioritising the political establishment over "grassroots" Muslim community needs. One respondent pointed to issues like "very high salaries" and leaders trying to "defend their privileges." Historically, Salafi leaders have even provided guidance on "conquering established ethnic mosques" by advising members to withhold fees, get elected to committees, and "take over" mosques. However, the relationship isn't always antagonistic; during crises, Salafis have been observed to become "temporary allies" with mainstream groups, highlighting a complex and shifting dynamic. In a fascinating turn, Salafis have increasingly invoked discourses of constitutional diversity and religious freedom to defend their practices against "liberal (Muslim) groups," forming unexpected alliances with conservative Christians and Jews who share concerns about the perceived erosion of traditional values.

Liberal Muslims also challenge the mainstream, focusing on promoting the pluralisation of the Islamic field and relativizing the mainstream's claim to represent the majority. They do not aim for a frontal attack but rather seek to strengthen their own niche through alternative public presentations and community organisations. As one board member of a liberal Muslim group explained, they do not expect "conservative organisations will now feel so pressured by us that they will...marry two men in their mosque." Instead, they seek recognition for liberal Islamic viewpoints among the diversity of Islamic positions, urging established associations to accept this diversity. They also question the legitimacy of the "large associations" as a majority, pointing to their unclear membership figures and highlighting the fragmented nature of the Islamic field where diverse positions should be considered equally important. While initially marginalised at forums like the [German Islam Conference](#), liberal Muslims have seen a shift in how mainstream actors engage with them, with some acknowledging common ground.

### Negotiating Purity and Diversity: Divergent Paths to Authenticity

The final question our research deals with is how both groups navigate cultural diversity and Islamic 'purity,' albeit with fundamentally different interpretations. Both engage in boundary-drawing, defining their relationship with wider society and the internal Muslim community.

Salafis prioritise a strict interpretation of Islamic "purity" based on their understanding of early Islamic tradition. While they demonstrate practical inclusivity in their mosques (allowing diverse Sunni Muslims to pray), their organisational leadership and doctrine remain exclusive to Salafi actors. Their engagement with cultural diversity is often framed through the lens of constitutional rights, particularly religious freedom. This has led to strategic alliances with conservative Christians and Jews who share concerns about the perceived erosion of traditional values, creating ["sharp demarcations towards liberal groups."](#) As a Salafi leader stated, "We Muslims can no longer openly say that homosexuality is a sin in Islam. But we live in a democracy where freedom of opinion and religious freedom are guaranteed, meaning that Muslims, Jews, and Christians have the right to say that homosexuality is a sin."

Liberal Muslims, on the other hand, are deeply committed to the values of the German Basic Law and universal human rights, asserting that Islamic values are inherently compatible with these principles. Their concept of purity, as understood from their perspective, lies in upholding these open societal values for religious reasons. Within their own organisations, they actively promote equality and inclusion, extending to gender and queer Muslims, and embrace denominational and cultural differences. While open to symbolic alliances with other Islamic organisations on issues like anti-Muslim racism, their commitment to "unrestricted equality of people of all genders" often creates clear boundaries with more conservative groups like Salafis but also traditional mosque communities, hindering deeper cooperation. It was even found that they have non-Muslim members who join out of solidarity to strengthen a liberal Islamic voice in public discourse.

### A Dynamic Landscape at the Margins

In conclusion, the positioning of Salafi and progressive Muslims towards mainstream Islam in Germany, while seemingly oppositional, reveals a shared dynamic of marginalisation and a contestation of established norms. Both groups, despite their divergent theological and social orientations, navigate the Islamic field with a degree of fluidity and a concern for the practical application of their beliefs in everyday life. Much like the nuanced agency observed in the scholarship on [urban religious networks](#), where superimposed doctrines interact with temporal realities, both Salafis and progressive Muslims demonstrate a practical everyday judgment of their faith, adapting and negotiating their identities within their specific social contexts. While their institutional strategies and boundary-drawing processes differ, the lived realities of individuals within these movements often involve complex negotiations that transcend rigid ideological categories, highlighting the dynamic and multifaceted nature of Islamic practice at the margins of the German Islamic field.

Further research is crucial to fully grasp the nuanced and often contradictory dynamics within the German Islamic field. Longitudinal studies, incorporating diverse qualitative data and analysing the evolving interactions between these marginalised groups and the mainstream, are necessary to track the long-term impact of securitisation and shifting socio-political landscapes on their identities and strategies. It is clear that German Islam is far from monolithic; it is a vibrant and contested space where diverse interpretations of faith are actively shaping its future.

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This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no 101019016)



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