

Gerdien Jonker. "In Search of Religious Modernity: Conversion to Islam in interwar Berlin"

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## Introduction

After the Great War, the global conflict, which forms the starting point for the following observations, Berlin experienced in exemplary fashion the devastating effects of increasing globalization. It found itself in the aftermath of a war it had not started but for which it nonetheless had to pay the costs. Towards the end of that war, which involved the loss of lives on a hitherto unknown scale, the Prussian, Ottoman, Habsburg and Russian Empires were abolished. Russia went through a revolution that changed the political topography of Eastern Europe and inspired dreams of revolution elsewhere; Hungary was occupied and forcibly turned Communist. Poland drew new borders, with deadly implications for the border populations; while the former Habsburg Empire was cut down to miniscule proportions. France, the country in which a large part of the war had been fought, came out drastically mutilated.<sup>1</sup>

After armistice was declared, Germany lived through a period of serious political destabilization. Most Germans failed to comprehend why the war had ended with their defeat, and it did not help that the political classes refused to acknowledge this.<sup>2</sup> National pride was at stake. Returning divisions formed paramilitary organizations, terrorizing Germany for at least four years. Between 1918 and 1922 the ultra-right created havoc in the Rhine area, the Baltic countries, and Schlesien. In Munich, a Communist regime took power. In Kiel, Hamburg and Berlin socialist uprisings and uncontrolled street fighting created high political tension.<sup>3</sup> From the far right to the far left, the country groped for a return to its "original" state, inventing as it went along a *Deutschheit* (German-ness) that resulted in visions of "anti-modern modernity"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Burbank. "War and Revolution in a World of Empires: 1914 - 1945," in *Empires in World History*, ed. Jane Burbank et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 369 - 413.

<sup>2</sup> John Horne and Alan Kramer. *German Atrocities. A History of Denial* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001), 327 - 400; Eric Hobsbawm. *The Age of Extremes. A History of the World 1914 - 1991*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Vanessa Conze. *Das Europa der Deutschen: Ideen von Europa in Deutschland zwischen Reichstradition und Westorientierung (1920 - 1970)* (Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2005), 25 - 100.

<sup>4</sup> Anselm Doering - Manteuffel. "Suchbewegungen in der Moderne. Religion im politischen Feld der Weimarer

and vehemently opposed the democratic but feeble Weimar government.

The spiritual vacuum that made itself felt across Europe accompanied the political crisis. Official religion, both in its Lutheran and Catholic form, quickly lost authority. The Kaiser had been a symbol for Protestantism and when he left the country the Lutheran church was widely felt to be devoid of meaning. Likewise, the occupation of the Rhineland and the refusal of the victorious powers to unite Germany with Austria contradicted the traditional German Catholic self-understanding as the *Christliches Abendland* (Christian Occident).<sup>5</sup> As a result, many people turned their back on the German churches and went in search of spiritual alternatives;<sup>6</sup> it helped that the globalization trends of the former age had already enhanced the level of knowledge and respect for other belief systems. In the age of modernity, the awareness of other religions not only meant enhancement of knowledge, it also implied the freedom to choose between them. Along with the study of religious texts, theosophy especially encouraged the study of religions through encounter, experience and conversion.<sup>7</sup> In the aftermath of the war, all these elements joined to create a fertile breeding ground for religious experiment. Foreign missionaries with a fresh message were welcomed, turning the Weimar republic into a stage for Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and alternative Christian missions.

After 1923, when a fragile equilibrium began to take hold, Berlin quickly became the cultural capital of continental Europe. A magnet for artists, writers, cinematographers and actors, it became the avant-garde center of European modernity. Journalists representing the main dailies across Europe and the US joined ranks in order to report about revolutionary progress and its backlashes.<sup>8</sup> 500,000 refugees from Russia flooded Berlin on their way to the Americas, among them the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia and revolutionary artists whom the revolution had betrayed.<sup>9</sup> This amalgam of people created an extraordinary creative potential. For some time, Berlin's big apartment houses were inhabited by a floating bohemia which was critical of European civilisation, sympathised with revolution, and wrote the books, produced the films

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Republik," in *Religion und Gesellschaft. Europa im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Friedrich Graf et al. (Köln-Weimar-Wien: Böhlau, 2007), 177.

<sup>5</sup> Doering - Manteuffel, *Suchbewegungen*, 179.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Klöckner et al. *Religionen in Deutschland. Kirchen, Glaubens-Gemeinschaften, Sekten*. München: Olzog Verlag, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Ulrich Linse. "Lebensreform und Reformreligionen," in *Die Lebensreform. Entwürfe der Neugestaltung von Leben und Kunst um 1900*, edited by Kai Buchholz et al. (Darmstadt: Haeusser-media, 2001), 193 - 199; Helmut Zander. *Anthroposophie in Deutschland. Theosophische Weltanschauung und gesellschaftliche Praxis 1884 - 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 33 - 51.

<sup>8</sup> Sigrid Bauschinger. "The Berlin Moderns: Else Lasker - Schüler and 'Café Culture,'" in *Berlin Metropolis*, ed. Emily D. Bilsky (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2000), 58 - 102.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Schlögel. *Das russische Berlin. Ostbahnhof Europas*. München: Pantheon, 2007; Verena Dohrn et al. *Transit und Transformation. Osteuropäisch - jüdische Migranten in Berlin 1918 - 1939*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012.

and created the art that today are among the classics of modern European art. The proponents of anti-modern modernity, the conservative élites, the National Socialists, and the right-winged paramilitary despised and hated them.<sup>10</sup>

This constellation served as the local setting in which students, writers, missionaries and revolutionaries from Muslim countries, constituting the Muslim community in interwar Berlin, interacted with their host society. Covering yet another angle, they were part of the same globalization disaster, in which the Muslim world had perceived Germany as a friend. During the Great War the Ottoman empire had been Germany's comrade-in-arms; Indian, Tatar and Arab revolutionaries had been trained by German and Ottoman officers to inspire upsurges against British colonial administrations; POW camps outside Berlin had gathered some 20,000 French, British and Russian Muslim prisoners of war. A mosque had been erected to serve their religious needs, and a group of Tatars, reluctant to join the revolution, built the first organizational structures. For some time, the financial crash produced low rents and a low cost of living, which made university study in Berlin attractive. Thus, Berlin became the stage for a nascent Muslim community, offering a local setting that favored the development of global, pan-Islamic ideas.<sup>11</sup> They were voiced in a large range of Arabic, Persian, Tatar, French and German periodicals, papers and books, which were all written, printed and published in Berlin.<sup>12</sup>

For ten years, from 1923 to January 1933, all these people turned Berlin into a melting pot in which extremes prevailed: extreme bourse crashes, extreme political instability, extreme outpourings of creativity, and extreme missionary activities. On January 30, 1933, when the fascist National Socialists came to power, the pluralistic society, which the Weimar republic had engendered, was scattered. The new regime forged political stability through the persecution of anybody who did not conform to its idea of German-ness, - targeting communists and socialists, artists and homosexuals, people who ridiculed their politics, gypsies and Jews alike. Remaining opponents left the country. The rest of the population conformed itself politically, taking membership in the Nazi party or becoming active in one of the many Nazi sub-organizations.<sup>1</sup> The influx of migrants was stopped. Foreigners were scrutinized and refused a residence permit

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<sup>10</sup> Werner Maser. Adolf Hitler. Mein Kampf. Geschichte. Auszüge. Kommentare. Rastatt: Moewig, 1981; Ernst von Salomon. Der Fragebogen. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1961.

<sup>11</sup> Gerhard Höpp. "Zwischen Moschee und Demonstration. Muslime in Berlin, 1922 - 1930," *Moslemische Revue* (1990): 135 - 146, (1990): 230 - 223, (1991): 12 - 19; Gerhard Höpp. 'Die Sache ist von immenser Wichtigkeit...' Arabische Studenten in Berlin (unpubl. ms. in Höpp Archive), 1990; Iskander Giljazov. Muslime in Deutschland: Von den zwanziger Jahren zum 'Islamische Faktor' während des 2. Weltkrieges (unpubl. ms. in Höpp Archive), 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Gerhard Höpp. Arabische und islamische Periodika in Berlin und Brandenburg 1915 - 1945. Geschichtlicher Abriß und Bibliographie. Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1994.

unless they conformed to Nazi politics. Alternative religious groups were closed down or put under control. Muslim organizations in Berlin faced the same choices as their German neighbors: Muslim Communists fled the country, the rest, again, conformed to, or cooperated with the prevailing regime.

This study addresses Muslim missionaries together with their goal: Germans who during these turbulent years chose to become Muslims. Starting in 1922, when the first Muslim mission commenced, it ends at the moment Germany entered the next war and the last missionary left the country. Within these limits, the study traces Muslim missionary activities and maps the different responses to them.

For two Muslim organizations especially, mission among the Europeans was central to their endeavor to ameliorate the situation in their home country British-India. The Islamische Gemeinde zu Berlin e.V. (IGB), invited Europeans to both embrace Islam and join their revolutionary struggle. For the Ahmadiyya Anjuman i-Isha'at i-Islam (AII), missionizing among the Europeans implied the creation of a transcultural religious space in which Indians and Germans met at eye-level and sought individual progress.<sup>ii</sup> Those were very different aims. In their quest for freedom, the IGB did not exclude the use of weapons, whereas the Ahmadiyya followed Gandhi and developed methods of non-violence. For the AII, mission amongst the Europeans was the primary aim and its missionaries went about it in ways that were highly professional, whereas the IGB first of all ministered to Muslim émigrés because what it needed was political solidarity, not converts in search of personal redemption. As a result, the two organizations were in constant competition.<sup>13</sup>

While introducing the reader to a range of convert biographies, the contribution looks for interfaces between different ideas of, and searches for, modernity. During the interwar period, visions of and experiments with man's progress in the name of modernity were at the heart of the transnational exchange, and for very different reasons, converting to Islam was considered a legitimate and widely accepted means towards that aim. Germans who opted for Islam moreover covered a wide societal and political range, from revolutionaries and avant-garde artists, to conservative university professors and orientalist, to sympathizers and members of the Nazi-Party, and included both Christians and Jews. Their imaginative conceptions of Islam differed accordingly, ranging from rational religion to mysticism, and from

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<sup>13</sup> Gerdien Jonker, "A Laboratory of Modernity – The Ahmadiyya Mission in Inter-war Europe." *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 3 (2014): 1 - 25. Forthcoming: *Missionising Europe. The Ahmadiyya Quest for Adaptive Globalisation 1900 – 1965* (under peer-reviewing with EJ Brill).

a religion fit for world revolution to one with a penchant towards the military. Apart from two of those actors, Lev Nussimbaum and Leopold Weiss, this group has not yet been the subject of academic research. This study therefore makes a novel contribution.

Missionary activities could be traced in registry files, mission journals, the archives of the Foreign Office as well as in the scant remains of the Ahmadiyya Mosque Archive. Tracing the convert biographies was more difficult. Some converts left only a name in the registry files, others added a photograph, still others a conversion narrative. Some wrote under a pseudonym, others swapped their Christian or Jewish for a Muslim surname. All this made access to their lives extremely difficult. In some cases, where it was possible to establish the original name, we found traces in the national library, sometimes also in the NSDAP membership files.

In the framework of this volume on European (trans) cultural history we ask what the missionary endeavor and its German responses added to the global exchange. Did the interaction engender fresh ideas and a transfer of knowledge? Did it manage to break down cultural borders? To find answers we will scrutinize the meeting between missionaries and converts while introducing the term religious modernity to describe the character of that meeting point. Our assumption is that the missionary field and that of modernity created various interfaces in the religious domain in which experimenting with religion played a decisive role.

### Leadership in the missionary field

Let us first direct a spotlight on the nascent Muslim community in Berlin. In 1922, there were already sixteen organizations in existence.<sup>14</sup> By 1932 we count twenty political organizations with the aim to liberate Muslim home countries from colonial rule, six student organizations, and six different religious organizations gathering as many as 46 different Muslim 'nations' in their ranks.<sup>15</sup> Situated in a non - Muslim country, leadership of this international community could only be symbolic and needed religious legitimacy in order to function. Once created, it was also subject to heavy competition, in which political, dogmatic and generational differences all played a part (*ibidem*). For the pan - Islamic aspirations Muslims in Berlin fostered, it was a prerequisite to unite the local community under one single leadership. The reality of their

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<sup>14</sup> Giljazov, *Muslime in Deutschland*; Höpp, *Zwischen Moschee und Demonstration*.

<sup>15</sup> Jonker, *Missionising Europe*.

diversity however forged a different course, creating several competing Muslim leaders who incidentally also employed different missionary styles. Because these men represented the 'face' of Islam in Germany, and official interaction with German society focused on them, each will be given a short introduction here.

Any attempt to create a 'Who's Who' of Muslim leadership and missionaries in interwar Berlin inevitably calls to mind Gilbert Achcar's ordering of the different political positions in the Arab world between 1933 and 1947.<sup>16</sup> Already anticipating the Arab political scene of the 1930s, Weimar Berlin collected western - oriented liberals, Marxists, nationalists, reactionaries and/or fundamentalist pan - Islamists. Differing from Achcar's findings however, most Muslim organizations in Berlin gravitated towards fascism in the 1930s, a trend that must be considered against the background of German oppressive politics. Whereas the liberal administration of the Weimar republic set the scene for political and cultural diversity, the Nazi regime tolerated only its own worldview, creating a framework in which Muslim fascist responses could become articulate.

In the order of their appearance on the Berlin stage, we first meet Abdul Jabbar Kheiri (1880 - 1958), who, during WWI, acted as an agitator against the British in the service of the Germans, and in 1922 united Berlin's Muslim population in the IGB. An Indian revolutionary working towards the liberation of the Muslim world, if need be with violent means, Kheiri combined Marxism with pan - Islamism. Global change, or so his philosophy seems to have run, had to come about through world revolution.<sup>17</sup> When founding the IGB, his political involvement and his mission among the Europeans seem to have closely interacted. The documents in the archive of the Foreign Office that deal with him consistently label him a Bolshevik;<sup>18</sup> In the eyes of his community, it made him a hero: a photograph in the file, dated 1925, reveals an authoritative man in turban and loose robes, carried in triumph on the shoulders of his young male community members.

In 1922, Kheiri also launched a mission journal, *Der Islam: Ein Wegweiser zur Rettung und zum Wiederaufbau* (Islam: A Guide for Rescue and Restoring). Here, for the first time in German history, Germans were invited to embrace Islam as a way to join the world revolution. Christianity cannot play that role, the text warns, because clearly it is a concoction of fantasy

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<sup>16</sup> Gilbert Achcar. *Les Arabes et la Shoah*, Paris: actes sud, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> AA/2 (Oct. 1928); Abdul Jabbar Kheiri. *Sowjet-Rußland und die Völker der Welt*. Petrograd: Verlag Kommunistische Internationale, 1924.

<sup>18</sup> AA/1, AA/2.

and lies, full of disdain for women. Only Islam holds the key to the main concerns of the day: “world peace”, “global freedom”, “justice”, “happiness”, “development” and “progress” (p. 17). In this text, key concepts of modernity (progress, development) are closely joined to global concerns: seen from this angle, liberation of the Muslim world from colonial oppression would bring world peace, justice and happiness. If peace and justice was what the Germans were looking for, or so the text seems to suggest, they should join the struggle and become part of the world-wide Muslim community.

The second leader who dominated these early years was Khwaja Sadr-ud-Din (1881 - 1981), a trained missionary of the Ahmadiyya Lahore. Arriving in 1923, he built a mosque in Wilmersdorf for which he was much envied and which for a long time remained the only one in Berlin. Thus responding to pressing needs, Sadr-ud-Din refrained from founding his own religious organization. Instead he used his energies to set up a mission post and in 1924 also launched the mission journal *Moslemische Revue*, introducing himself as a western - oriented Muslim intellectual interested in starting a conversation with European intellectuals on the topic of peace and personal progress. His mission advance was simple and straightforward. From 1925 onwards, every issue featured ‘modern’ aspects of this religion and explained how to join: “To become a Muslim, a ceremony is not required. Islam is not only a rational, widely spread and practical religion, it is also in full harmony with the natural human disposition. Every child is born with it. This is why becoming a Muslim does not require a transformation. One can be a Muslim without telling anybody. (...).”<sup>19</sup>

This indeed was a totally different message than that which the IGB stood for. Progress, or so the Ahmadiyya philosophy ran, was inherent to personal progress and a key concept of Islam. Except for their contribution to world pacifism (see below), Ahmadiyya did not target global politics. Rather, they tried to create a transnational space for the meeting of different cultures.<sup>20</sup> To Germans who tried to sort out their present spiritual turmoil the Ahmadiyya mission advance indeed offered an intellectual and emotional meeting ground, one in which different approaches to European modernity, especially the concept of *Lebensreform* (Life Reform) could be brought forward, questioned and linked to Islam and Muslim modernization.

In 1927, a third leader entered the Berlin stage, who in only a few years time superseded Kheiri, opening up the Arab community towards a more practical, western- oriented liberalism.

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<sup>19</sup> *Moslemische Revue* (1925): 20.

<sup>20</sup> Jonker, Laboratory.

Arriving as a student in 1923, Mohammed Nafi Tschelebi (1901 - 1933), founder of The Islam-Institute and The Islam-Archive, actively worked towards what he called “a fruitful, healthy synthesis of Islamic and European cultures”.<sup>21</sup> His concept included a critical approach to the convert influx. Tschelebi was the first who drafted a set of rules for Europeans who wished to become Muslim. In all his considerations, the safeguarding of traditional religion played a leading part. As the Foreign Office observed: “Oriental attempts at modernizing (..) are also located in circles that want to safeguard the old religious bond, that is to say the religiously minded Arabs, Egyptians, Indians etc., even reaching into the Wahhabi camp”.<sup>22</sup> Tschelebi was not a Wahhabi. Rather, he combined a rare mix of western - oriented liberalism, religious nationalism and pan - Islamism.

To complete the picture, mention must also be made of the Sufi Bewegung e.V. (Sufi movement), founded in 1925 by the missionary Hazrat Pir Inayat Khan (1882 - 1927). Seeking individual religious experience, this organization did not position itself politically, nor did it attract the attention of the Foreign Office or any of the media. However, it substantially catered to the Ahmadiyya mosque. Eight years later, when German politics changed from liberalism to persecution, it immediately dissolved itself,<sup>23</sup> while at about the same time the DMG stretched its feelers in the direction of spirituality and inclusion. As a result, some of the members, notably Hosseyn Kazemzadeh “Iranschär” (1884 – 1962), in earlier life a revolutionary congenial to the German government and a creative publisher trying to promote the regeneration of Iran,<sup>24</sup> re-surfaced in the Ahmadiyya mosque with an experimental mixture of theosophy and Sufi wisdom.<sup>25</sup>

Once established, the Nazi regime set the scene for a very different kind of Muslim leadership, although, some years passed before the face of Islam in Berlin started to change. Between 1928 and 1936, the Ahmadiyya missionary SM Abdullah (1889 - 1956) dominated the mission activity; Kheiri left the city in 1929 and Tschelebi drowned in summer 1933 while swimming in a nearby lake. In 1930, while the country quickly moved towards National Socialism and intellectuals of right and left signaled a new atmosphere of “no-nonsense”,<sup>26</sup> meaning that the chaotic market of ideas was given up in favor of one single solution, with the

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<sup>21</sup> AA/2: An Islamic Press - Agency in Berlin (undated).

<sup>22</sup> AA/2: Islamische Verständigungsarbeit in Berlin (Oct. 1928).

<sup>23</sup> VR Sufi (April, 1933).

<sup>24</sup> J a m s h i d Behnam. “Iranshär’ and ‘Iranshär, Hosayn Kazemzada’,” in Encyclopedia Iranica vol. XIII (2006), 535 - 536, 537 - 539.

<sup>25</sup> Moslemische Revue (1933): issue 3; (1935): issue 3 – 4; (1936): issue 2; cf. Jonker, Missionising Europe.

<sup>26</sup> Salomon, Der Fragebogen, 242.



help of the Kantian philosopher Hugo Marcus (1880 – 1966), Abdullah founded the Deutsch-Moslemische Gesellschaft e.V. (The German Muslim Society, or DMG). The initiative attracted a peculiar segment of Berlin society in which in its early stages liberals, pacifists and Nazi sympathizers mingled in their search for a religious modernity that befitted the present age. From their contributions to the Moslemische Revue, the search seemed to have been truly open-minded, including orientalism, the meeting of “East” and “West”, pacifism, gestalt psychology, life reform, rational conduct, different outlines of “future man”, and an open sympathy with the newest Nazi reforms, - notably hygiene and body culture (see below). Until 1933, the DMG also met with a wide public acknowledgement. An inter-religious entrepreneur, Abdullah was repeatedly invited to speak in front of Catholic, theosophist and Jewish audiences.<sup>27</sup> As an active pacifist, he visited international peace conferences and drew up questionnaires to bring out the peace potential of the different world religions.<sup>28</sup>

In 1933, president of the AAI, Muhammed Ali, assessing the political landslide in Germany, came up with a positive result: “We welcome the new regime in Germany as it favors the simpler principles of life which Islam inculcates. Islam’s great contribution to the civilization of the world is its solution of the wealth problem and the sex problem. (...). So far we can see, Germany under the new regime is tackling both the wealth and the sex problem in an Islamic spirit, and there is every hope that in the future the whole of Europe would follow in its wake (...).”<sup>29</sup> Thus fortified, the DMG continued to study and to single out aspects of European modernity. On the surface, nothing changed.

However, in 1935 the DMG shed the last of its liberal and pacifist members, among them the philosopher Marcus, a former Jew who had played a major role in shaping the religious search. Having repeatedly received accusations from IGB members that the DMG would “shelter communists and Jews”, Abdullah wrote to the Foreign Office to introduce a new DMG board. His enumeration of party memberships reads like a directory of main Nazi organizations: “Our president Mr. Boosfeld is member in the Opfer-Kreis für die National-socialistische Partei; our second secretary Dr. Klopp von Hofe is member of the NSDAP and the SS; the treasurer Mr. Schubert is member of the Arbeitsfront, and the first assessor, Mr. Beier is member of the NSDAP”.<sup>30</sup> iii

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<sup>27</sup> AMA / Interwar: 4.

<sup>28</sup> AMA / Interwar: 5; 12 - 13.

<sup>29</sup> Moslemische Revue 2-3 (1934): 45 – 46; AMA / Interwar: 5.

<sup>30</sup> AA/3 (31.08.1936).

About the same time a man called Habibur Rahman (1901 - ?) appeared on the scene, incorporating the novel kind of leadership for which Nazi politics allowed. Rahman was an Indian Muslim and comrade-in-arms of the future founder of independent India, Subha Chandras Bose.<sup>31</sup> He was already studying in Berlin when Jabbar Kheiri set up the IGB,<sup>32</sup> but for a long time remained invisible on the organizational level. In 1936, Rahman revived the IGB, which had been inactive after Kheiri's departure, acting as its secretary general until, in 1938, he was elected president.<sup>33</sup> Two years later he was also elected president of the Islam-Institute, thus uniting the two organizations under one umbrella.<sup>34</sup>

Profiting from a political atmosphere that encouraged denunciation, Rahman made ample use of it to reach his goals. Between 1935 and 1939, he wrote many letters to the Foreign Office and the major Arab and Indian dailies in which he denounced the Ahmadiyya for performing an "unscrupulous mission" and fostering "criminal, communist, and Jewish elements".<sup>35</sup> Rahman also tried to incriminate the Ahmadiyya missionary Abdullah wherever he could, claiming that the latter played tennis with his wife when "normal" Muslims were praying, sold pork, and had illicit contacts with German women.<sup>36</sup> Rahman's missionary activity was limited to doing damage to the Ahmadiyya successes. Continuing Tschelebi's approach to converts, he also increased restrictions for embracing Islam a great deal (see below).

Habibur Rahman strove for acknowledgement as main Muslim representative vis-à-vis the Nazi Regime. Although he closely cooperated with a favorite of the Nazis, the Mufti of Jerusalem Amin Al-Husseini, his own role in the war remained minor.<sup>iv</sup> Politically, Rahman seems to have embraced a mix of nationalist and pan - Islamist positions, swapping, like so many others around him, communism for fascism in response to the Nazi pressure.

### Converts to different Muslim Modernities

The mission advances of Jabbar Kheiri, head of the IGB, and those of Sadr-ud-Din, head of the Ahmadiyya mission, each drew a very different crowd, a difference that still deepened as their place was taken by Habibur Rahman and SM Abdullah. Only three of Kheiri's converts, Albert Seiler, Khalid Banning, and Maria Hesselbach switched to the Ahmadiyya, while only one new

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<sup>31</sup> AA/3 (20.3.1936); Jan Kuhlmann. Subhas Chandra Bose und die Indienpolitik der Achsenmächte Zeitgeschichte (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2003), 343.

<sup>32</sup> VR IGB: 7 - 8.

<sup>33</sup> VR IGB: 184 - 199.

<sup>34</sup> VR IIB: 1939.

<sup>35</sup> AA/4 (22.3.1937).

<sup>36</sup> AA/4 (Aug. - Sept., 1936).

Muslim from the ranks of the Ahmadiyya (Georg Konieczny) joined the IGB. For the rest, the two convert circles kept their distance. As we saw, the main distinction between the two mission advances was in their approach to British-India, in which the progress of Islam and the betterment of the political situation were interlinked. The very different solutions each put forward – world revolution versus individual progress - had different implications for the modernization of the world and the place of the German Muslims therein. To this, converts added their own distinctions. Whereas the IGB attracted the student generation born after 1900, the Ahmadiyya appealed to members of the upper middle class, many of whom were born in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the war, the former age group was branded Generation 1902 because it had been too young to experience the front line and consequently could not claim heroic deeds; while the latter had fought in the trenches of Northern France and Galicia, an experience which had utterly destabilized their lives. In this section, we will encounter the two age groups at several intersections of their time line, seeking to understand how they experimented with religion in order to remedy their needs in ways that modernity allowed for.

#### IGB – Islamia - Islam-Institute

Among the young who felt attracted to Kheiri's revolutionary message we meet students and artists trying to escape the German isolation that was developing; they were critical of western civilization, dared to articulate anti - war views, and to all appearances felt thrilled to join a non-European international movement. From the scant biographies that remain one gains the impression that for them, joining Islam first of all implied joining the anti - colonial struggle in support of the liberation movements in North Africa and British India. Some fifty German and Eastern European students, flanked by a few of the elder generation, first joined the IGB, then regrouped in the student organization Islamia finally to break away from Kheiri in 1927 by setting up the Islam-Institute. Who were they?

At the height of Jabbar Kheiri's quarrel with the Islamia,<sup>v</sup> he released a list of active IGB members,<sup>37</sup> accusing German Muslims especially of communism and "frequent contacts to Moscow".<sup>38</sup> In these correspondences, the reader encounters a string of German Muslims: Dr. H.

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<sup>37</sup> VR IGB: 159 - 64.

<sup>38</sup> AA/2 ( 17.12.1928).

'Khalid' Banning, Ewald Brendel, Helene Bosner, Anton Dybe, Adelheid Cappelle, Albert Fischer, Dr. Käthe Göritz, Friedrich 'Hassan' Heinze, Erna 'Hedije' Hoefmann, Walther 'Hassan' Hoffmann, Bruno Kramer, Hans 'Ali' Knofke, Erwin 'Hossein' Neumann, Bruno Richter, Elsa Schiemann, Hermann Schulz, Albert 'Chalid' Seiler, Werner Voigt, Ulla Westermann, and others.<sup>39</sup> Across the sources, we count at least two artists and painters (Bruno Richter, Elsa Schiemann), two publishers and art printers (Anton Dybe, Albert Seiler) and a string of dissertation students. Käthe Göritz, Werner Voigt and Erwin Neumann deposited their dissertations in the Berlin National Library. Erna Hoefmann, Albert Seiler and Bruno Richter secured the connection to the university Institute of Oriental Studies.<sup>39</sup> Some can be traced throughout the records of interwar Islam, notably Walther Hoffmann, Bruno Richter and Albert Seiler, who never tired of novel attempts to re-shape the Berlin Muslim community. Of this circle, only Anton Dybe and Georg Konieczny re-emerged after the war to help restore Muslim life in Germany.<sup>40</sup>

The list features only two well known names, that of Leopold Weiss/Muhammed Asad (1900 - 1982) and Lev Nussimbaum/Esad Bey (1905 - 1942).<sup>41</sup> Raised in different Jewish milieus - Weiss in Lemberg, Nussimbaum in Kiev or Baku<sup>vii</sup> - both had arrived in Berlin with the first waves of Russian refugees. Both arrived with nothing, took up oriental studies, and eventually managed to become journalists with an oriental assignment. Both embraced Islam, but as it seems for very different reasons. Thirty years later, Weiss describes in his autobiography his conversion experience, an intense moment of rejection of western civilization, in which he suddenly "saw" the lack of fulfillment and the unhappiness of the wealthy Berliners sitting next to him in the U-Bahn.<sup>42</sup> In very different fashion, Nussimbaum experimented with an exotic sounding name, weaving a fable of his oriental origin as he went along. Originally, he seems to have made a living in the Romanische Café, where he recited oriental stories in appropriate garb to the assembled bohemia.<sup>43</sup> Later on, he downright denied his conversion, claiming to be the offspring of a Azerbaijani Muslim oil millionaire in Baku, and a Russian bolshevist mother

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<sup>39</sup> VR SOS: 53, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Mohammed A. Hobohm. *Neuanfänge muslimischen Gemeindelebens nach dem Krieg*, 2000.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20070129062534http://members.aol.com/dmlbonn/archiv/hobohm2.html>

<sup>41</sup> Günther Windhager. *Leopold Weiss alias Muhammad Assad*. Wien: Böhlau, 2003; Tom Reiss. *Der Orientalist*. Auf den Spuren von Esad Bey. Berlin: Osburg Verlag, 2008; Gerhard Höpp. *Moh. Esad Bey: Nur Orient für Europäer?* (unpubl. ms.), 1995; Gerhard Höpp. "Noussimbaum wird Essad Bey. Annäherung an eine Biographie zwischen den Kulturen," *Moslemische Revue* (1996): 18 - 26.

<sup>42</sup> Muhammad Asad. *The Road to Mecca* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 174 - 177.

<sup>43</sup> Tom Reiss, *Der Orientalist*, 256.

who happened to be imprisoned in that city at the time of marriage.<sup>44</sup>

Weiss/Asad and Nussimbaum/Esad Bey were migrants from Eastern Europe. Scrutinizing Kheiri's list, it seems that other Eastern Europeans accompanied them. The reader meets with Helene Adas, Ewald Brendel, Albert Ceasar Czernikow, Viktor Glikin, Leon Jekelzewitz, Arpad Jerenzz, Diodor Kopinski, Leowar Mirimanian, Melly Podleschewsky, Paul Warkoicz, and Eugenie Woranoff, the lives of who, however, could not be reconstructed. A small consolation: many of these family names can be traced to the passenger lists of the steamers that weekly left for America. A survey through the North- and South-American Jewish communities suggests that many of them had Jewish roots as well.

Kheiri's high-flying plans finally came to nothing. Isolated after a nasty dispute over the abolishment of the khalifate, he discontinued not only the mission journal but also the IGB yearly gatherings.<sup>45</sup> In the end, the student leader of the Islam-Institute Nafi Tschelebi dethroned him. Tschelebi's idea of Muslim modernization was not world revolution, but the laying of foundations for future Muslim nation states. Although accused of receiving money from Moscow,<sup>46</sup> he nonetheless acquired the trust and cooperation of important German institutions, and in only a short period of time created the Islam-Institute, the Islam-Archive, two periodicals and a dense local network. Tschelebi managed to give a different thrust to the development of Muslim modernity in Berlin. In their estimate of the political situation, the Foreign Office judged his circle "to have completely distanced itself from the 'world revolutionaries' and their political - military illusions, which dominated the war and the post war period", deciding that the time had come "to begin a fruitful cooperation".<sup>47</sup>

The Islam-Institute indeed became an attractive place for many different people. Director of the university institute of Oriental Studies, Prof. Kampffmeier and member of Parliament Julius Bachem sat on the board; Walther Hoffmann, Bruno Richter and Georg Konieczny served as authors, editors and printers of its periodicals. From the Middle East, Weiss/Asad and Nussimbaum/Esad Bey contributed articles; Erna Hedije Hoefmann and Albert Chalid Seiler were commissioned to run a convert register and to "rethink the

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<sup>44</sup> Esad Bey. *Öl und Blut im Orient. Meine Kindheit in Baku und meine haarsträubende Flucht durch den Kaukasus* (München: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1930), 17; Wilfried Fuhrmann. *Plagiat, Lüge oder Vertrauen? Wo ist Essad-Bey?* [www.essadbey.de](http://www.essadbey.de), 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Jonker, *Missionising Europe*.

<sup>46</sup> AA/2 (17.10.1928): 3.

<sup>47</sup> AA/2 (17.10.1928): 1.

relationship between old and new Muslims”.<sup>48</sup> With a view to the convert influx, this was a novel policy, and it pointed towards restriction: “Inscribed in the register may be those who are able to give proof of exit from their former religious community and proof of entry to Islam”.<sup>49</sup> The phrase dips into the sensitive subject of religious belonging, revealing the fact that many new Muslims did not deem it necessary to exit from their former religious communities. Rather, as will be discussed in the next section, German religious seekers preferred to move from one religious station to the next, without binding themselves.

Nonetheless, whereas many of the Muslim émigrés only stayed the duration of their university study, German Muslims guaranteed continuity and durability for the community. There is no doubt that the impact of this circle was in anchoring Islam in Germany. Adopting the role of navigator, cultural translator and interpreter in the local framework, the transfer they engaged in was in the field of local knowledge. In contrast to Muslim émigrés, local Muslims knew all about the legal requirements and the political and societal expectations surrounding the founding of migrant organizations.

Khalid Banning for instance navigated the proceedings, which led to the foundation of the IGB.<sup>50</sup> Hoffmann, his wife Emina, Erna Hoeftmann, and Seiler supported Nafi Tschelebi in breaking away from the IGB.<sup>51</sup> Hoffmann even took it upon himself to file a complaint.<sup>52</sup>

In the mid-thirties, Hoffmann and Konieczny also supported the revival of the IGB by Habibur Rahman. Hoffmann, a former communist, sat on the board. Secretary Konieczny signed his letters with “Heil Hitler!”,<sup>53</sup> was active in different Nazi organizations and also acquired NSDAP membership.<sup>54</sup> Seiler, by then head of the DMG but equally supportive of the Islam-Institute, pleaded amalgamation with the IGB, a suggestion the DMG board utterly rejected.<sup>55</sup> On their part Muslim émigrés increasingly considered German Muslims as dismissible. When, on May 27, 1940 Rahman finally attempted to fuse the IGB with the Islam-Institute, thus creating the platform that was to be the official Muslim representative vis-à-vis the war ministries, none of them were invited any more.

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<sup>48</sup> Die Islamische Gegenwart. Monatszeitschrift für die Zeitgeschichte des Islam, edited by M. Nafi Tschelebi and Muhammed Hassan Hoffmann (Berlin: 1929): 1.

<sup>49</sup> Die Islamische Gegenwart: 1.

<sup>50</sup> VR IGB: 8.

<sup>51</sup> VR IGB: 20.

<sup>52</sup> VR IGB: 58, 66 - 70, 79, 94 - 95, 104.

<sup>53</sup> VR IGB: 1935.

<sup>54</sup> BarchB: Nr. 4831277.

<sup>55</sup> VR DMG (Sept. 1938).

How can one recognize a convert? The answer to this question very much depends on how the act of conversion is defined. Over the last hundred years, sociologists of religion came up with many definitions, from “a radical change of consciousness in which the individual changes both his world view and his identity”, to “socially embedded happenings which are communicated through group belonging, narrations of the self and demonstrative acts”.<sup>56</sup> For some, conversion is a communicative act, for others, it signals deep psychic change. For scholars who occupy themselves with boundary marking, converts are radical transgressors of cultural borders: they quit their traditional (religious) habitat in order to adopt the space of the other.<sup>57</sup> Seen through this lens, bodily signs that broadcast one’s new solidarity seem to be a necessity: otherwise, how can the adopted community recognize that the newcomer is one of them?

Turning the pages of the *Moslemische Revue*, that necessity is utterly absent. Many Germans accepting Islam with the help of the Ahmadiyya missionaries published a photograph in this journal, which they labeled with their real or adopted name. In addition, some added a conversion narrative. Others wrote learned articles on aspects of Islam, in which the reader easily detects autobiographical traces. In all, fifteen individual photographs were published. Some of the portrayed appear alone, others with Sadr-ud-Din. Two newly wed couples pose in front of the mosque. One photograph portrays a whole family.

In line with the missionaries view that “becoming a Muslim does not require a transformation” (see above), the portrayed nowhere stress their transgression. They are neither adorned with ‘Islamic’ elements, nor do they dress up in any other special way. “Dr. H. Khalid Banning”, for instance, very much looks like the public prosecutor he probably was (1924).<sup>viii</sup> Banning posed with “Muhammed Taufiq Killenger”, a military looking gentleman whom an undated Ahmadiyya pamphlet from the 1930s describes as an adventurer who has served in the different armies of the world: the Hungarian, the Austrian, the Swiss, the Dutch colonial, the Venezuelan, and the Ottoman.<sup>58</sup> In 1938, he will surface again as M.T. Killinger, enthusiastically welcoming the Nazi occupation of Sudetenland.<sup>ix</sup> During the Second World War an old man already, Killinger repeatedly offers his service to the SS, which eventually employs him as

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<sup>56</sup> Detlev Pollack. “Was ist Konversion?” in *Treten Sie ein! Treten Sie aus! Warum Menschen ihre Religion wechseln*, ed. Loewy, Hanno et al. (Berlin: Parthas, 2012), 44.

<sup>57</sup> Michele Lamont. “The Study of Boundaries Across the Social Sciences,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 167 - 195.

<sup>58</sup> AA/5.

director of the SS Imam-training.<sup>59</sup>

In the next issue, we meet with very different characters. One names himself “Konrad Giesel”, holding a book in his hands on which is written “With Islam, 1.X.1924”, we identified as Konrad Algermissen, in ordinary life a Roman - Catholic priest who during the 1920s published a series of sociological studies on different religious “sects” with Giesel Verlag. His photograph evokes the German intellectual; in the accompanying analysis “Thoughts on Community”, Algermissen enthused about the community potential of Islam.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, Hanns Lobauers’ photograph corroborates his self-description as a tormented Prussian officer who lost himself in the trenches.<sup>61</sup> Only one of the ladies of this early period has wrapped herself in a kind of Indian cloth (1925). The other two present an upper middle class image: short hair, well dressed, and wearing pearls.<sup>62</sup> (1924, 1925).

The pattern repeats itself in the portrayals of the early 1930s. “Saffiah Irma Gohl, stud. Phil.”, commissioned an art photograph in which she poses as a modern German woman: exposed long hands and a flowery band in her short hair (1931). In her conversion narrative Saffiah describes her religious quest as “a journey”, past Buddha, Zoroaster and Confucius, through the cliffs of Egyptology, oriental studies and Arab literature, until she finally encountered an Egyptian who would become her spiritual mentor, and eventually her husband.<sup>63</sup> In 1944, the two of them will direct an inflammatory protest to the League of Nations, describing in detail the “havoc and ruin” caused by the Italian armies in Tripolis.<sup>64</sup> Of all the German converts, she will be the only one who engages in resistance against the Nazi regime.

Also in 1931, the *Moslemische Revue* finally featured an oil painting of the founder of the DMG: “Dr. Hamid Marcus, President of the Deutsch-Moslemische Gesellschaft e.V.”. We behold him in the typical posture of Germany’s poets and thinkers, outstretched fingers against his temple, books in the background, and a furrow between his brows.

In the scant remains of the interwar mosque archive his hand-written conversion narrative, dating 1931, survived, and corroborates his self-conception as ‘thinker’.<sup>65</sup> Studies on conversion often stress that the blueprint of any conversion narrative is the transformation

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<sup>59</sup> Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsfeld. “The Training of Imams by the Third Reich,” in *The Study of Religion and the Training of Muslim Clergy in Europe. Academic and Religious Freedom in the 21st Century*, ed. Willem B. Drees et al. (Leiden: University Press, 2008), 348 - 368.

<sup>60</sup> *Moslemische Revue* (1925): 25 - 28.

<sup>61</sup> *Moslemische Revue* (1926): 34 - 38.

<sup>62</sup> *Moslemische Revue*, photographs preceding the 1924 and 1925 issues.

<sup>63</sup> *Moslemische Revue* (1931): 56 - 59.

<sup>64</sup> *AMA / Post-war*: 2.

<sup>65</sup> *AMA / Interwar*: 7.



from crisis to salvation, followed by the urge to give witness.<sup>66</sup> Differently, but much in line with Ahmadiyya philosophy, Marcus stated that his journey to Islam was neither governed by crisis (like Lohbauer and other front soldiers), nor by a spiritual journey (like Gohl and others who used theosophy as a vehicle) but by continuation. As a philosophy student, he had embraced Kant, Nietzsche and Spinoza and developed the philosophy of “mono - pluralism”, creating the foundation of a severe kind of monotheism as he progressed. In this self-portrait he could therefore rightly stress that, while encountering Islam in the person of Sadr-ud-Din, he only re-discovered his philosophical roots.

Marcus also had Jewish roots, a fact that on the surface seems not to have played a role in his writings. His biography still remains to be written, but from his many contributions to the *Moslemische Revue* it already becomes clear that this philosopher searched for a modern religious foundation, which had outgrown the old religions, and from which could grow up “novel man”. “Where and who are the people for whom it is worth to (re-) shape the world into a paradise? Where are these people to whom belongs the future as we want it?” he asks in “Religion and Future Man”, to which he answers himself: “We will not find them, we will have to create them first”.<sup>67</sup>

In the last years of the Weimar Republic, Hugo Hamid Marcus truly was not the only one who raised this question. ‘Novel man’, ‘novel leadership’, and ‘people of the future’ were the catchwords which governed the politics of the day, which appeared in a multitude of book titles and stood for visions of the future that ranged from modern to anti-modern, from liberal to conservative, from the far right to the far left.<sup>68</sup>

The difference between Marcus’ vision, as laid down in his writings for the *Moslemische Revue*, and the solution that in 1933 forced its way to political power, must be sought in the open-minded curiosity with which this philosopher tried to bridge not only East and west, Christianity and Islam, but also left - and right-winged ideologies. Marcus, himself born in 1880 and a veteran of the Great War, believed in the creative powers of a young generation, which had been molded by a religion that embraced rationality as well as modernity, practical humanitarianism as well as spirituality. From his writings it becomes clear that this could only be Islam.

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<sup>66</sup> Andreas B. Kilcher. “Konversion als Erzählung,” in *Treten Sie ein! Treten Sie aus! Warum Menschen ihre Religion wechseln*, ed. Hanno Loewy et al. (Berlin: Parthas, 2012), 50 - 64.

<sup>67</sup> *Moslemische Revue* (1930): 66.

<sup>68</sup> Friedbert Aspetsberger. ‘Arnolt Bronnen.’ *Biografie* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1995), 412; Maser, Adolf Hitler, 315 - 316; Kurt Hiller. *Leben gegen die Zeit. Erinnerungen* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1969), 218 f.

But creating “future man” was still very much work in progress, its result open-ended. For the moment it led to very different profiles. Returning to the photo gallery displayed on the pages of the *Moslemische Revue*, two men of that young-and-coming generation still need to be highlighted. At the time, they seemed to incorporate the ideal Marcus envisioned.

One year after Marcus’ publication, Rolf von Ehrenfels, born in 1901 in Prague, son of the gestalt therapist Christian Baron von Ehrenfels, at home in the literary and bohemian circles of Vienna, Prague and Budapest, answered with “Islam and the Young Generation in Europe”.<sup>69</sup> Positioning himself as a man of the future, Ehrenfels drew a parallel between Islam and certain aspects of the European *Lebensreform* (life reform). Amongst others, he addressed erotic communication, respect for the earth, ways in which people greet each other, dress themselves, and shape their house interiors, and thereby creating a framework in which they live and communicate. Islam, he concluded, is modern because it possesses the potential to shape life in ways that are recognized as progressive in Europe. In 1931 Ehrenfels was still to become an anthropologist but the theory behind the article points to the future; it was already his conjecture that material frameworks shape and direct human communication and experience. Typically, Ehrenfels’ own encounter, which made him decide to embrace Islam in the first place, was an intensive experience of mosque architecture, resulting in a thick description that betrays the influence of gestalt therapy.<sup>70</sup>

Although Ehrenfels was appointed co-editor of the *Moslemische Revue* and donned several articles, he never published his photograph. We only know his contemporary face from his journey to Lahore in 1933 to meet with the Ahmadiyya mother organization, as well as some earlier photographs published in the Nussimbaum biography.<sup>71</sup>

Some years later, the editors of the *Moslemische Revue* thought to recognize another “future man” in the popular author “Faruq H. Fischer”. Invited to present a piece on the occasion of the ten-year celebration, they announced him as “the well-known author, one of the youngest Europeans who have gladly embraced Islam”<sup>72</sup> x The accompanying photograph bears the traits of a sleek and calculating Nazi youth, and his name can be traced to Hans Fischer who, in 1932 and 1933, was one of the up-and-coming young men of popular Nazi ideology. His many theatre plays, advertised with titles like *Jung Deutschland voran* (Young Germany to the Fore),

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<sup>69</sup> *Moslemische Revue* (1931): 81 - 91.

<sup>70</sup> *Moslemische Revue* (1930): 98 - 105.

<sup>71</sup> Reiss, *Der Orientalist*, 363.

<sup>72</sup> *Moslemische Revue* (1934): 62.

Deutschland's Morgenroth entflammt! (Germany's dawn ignites!), or Heb' deine Flügel, deutscher Adler... (Raise your wings, German eagle...) are full of blood-and-earth symbols and ugly instances of anti-Semitism, which he employed for comic effect.

What did this "future man" write for the *Moslemische Revue*? His contribution he titled "Does Islam 'lack modernity'? – A parallel between the old religion and Europe of the present".<sup>73</sup> On its pages, Fischer, like Ehrenfels, sets off to find parallels between Islam and examples of modern European-ness but unlike Ehrenfels, in Fischer's world 'modern' is everything that Nazi ideology stands for: Islam forbids alcohol? No problem! "The Führer of the German people does not take one single drop!";<sup>74</sup> or: does Islam lack progress? Certainly not! "Europe adopts more and more Islamic thought".<sup>75</sup> Instead of intellect and liberalism, Fischer writes, Nazism propagates hygiene, sports and attachment to the earth; instead of individualism, it cultivates group experience.<sup>76</sup> To Fischer, this is what Islam is all about: "Not modern? Never! Not civilized? Never! Otherwise, our statesmen would not act in an Islamic way. Are you not modern? Am I perhaps not modern?"<sup>77</sup>

### Shaping Religious Modernity

From our visit to the photo gallery of the Ahmadiyya mission journal, it becomes clear that 'their' new Muslims did not adopt any visible Islamic attributes because, firstly, it was the Ahmadiyya view that "becoming a Muslim does not require a transformation", and secondly, because the Germans thought that their entry necessitated a range of changes for Islam as a matter of course. For the circle of Muslim emigrés who gathered in the IGB, the German enthusiasm to join Islam thus acquired an uncomfortable edge. In their view, the way converts in the Ahmadiyya mosque communicated about Islam and the courses to progress they suggested, were not only unrecognizable to 'real' Muslims, but they should be downright rejected.

Early 1937, Habibur Rahman sent a 10-page paper to the Foreign Office, in which he once again summarized his grievances against the Ahmadiyya.<sup>78</sup> The Ahmadiyya, he states, presents a

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<sup>73</sup> *Moslemisch Revue* (1934): 62 - 73.

<sup>74</sup> *Moslemisch Revue* (1934): 67.

<sup>75</sup> *Moslemisch Revue* (1934): 71.

<sup>76</sup> *Moslemisch Revue* (1934): 71.

<sup>77</sup> *Moslemisch Revue* (1934): 73.

<sup>78</sup> AA/4 (22.03.1937):1.

serious disturbance in Berlin, not only because they possess the only mosque but because the ways in which they shape Islam forces the IGB to prevent Muslims from praying there. “Disturbing” is the “shameless, indiscriminate mission activity”, which attracts “criminal elements such as Jewish and communist agitators”.<sup>79</sup> By way of solution, Rahman suggests to put the convert influx under severe control, the rules for which have already been laid down in the renewed founding protocol of the IGB.<sup>80</sup> This document stipulates that converts should not only give written proof of their exit from the former community and their entry into the Muslim community, as Tschelebi already decreed, but also they have to prove “flawless conduct for a period of two years”, give “written consent to adopt a Muslim name”, and establish “serious attempts to acquire one of the oriental languages”.<sup>81</sup>

Why did Rahman bear down on converts in a manner that seems designed to prevent them from becoming a Muslim at all? Despite the hate tirade with which the author attacked his opponent, despite his obvious greed to obtain the mosque, there is an element in this text that touches upon the very nature of religious renewal itself.

In an article headed “We Require a Mosque in Berlin”, appearing some weeks later in “The Star of India”, he or one of his circle explained the rationale behind his statement. Becoming explicit, the author deplores a feeling of foreignness when visiting the discussion circle in the Ahmadiyya mosque, and when participating in prayer even detects something decidedly un-Islamic:

“If (..) a Muslim pays a visit to one of the conferences which are held on Friday evening in the mosque or in the house of the Imam, he will probably find there a Christian lady or gentleman delivering a speech about beautiful landscapes in foreign countries, about the political situation in India, about Persian Poets and all sorts and kinds of subjects of more or less general interest. Real Islamic instructions and information are hardly ever given and if so, the subject will mostly serve to cover up the difference between Islam and Christianity”.<sup>82</sup>

Partaking in the Friday prayer presents another shock:

“To take part at the congregational Friday Prayer is impossible for an orthodox Muslim. (..) The few

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<sup>79</sup> AA/4 (22.03.1937): 7 - 8.

<sup>80</sup> AA/4 (10.07.1936. Protocol in attachment).

<sup>81</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>82</sup> AA/4 (21.04.1937. Newspaper clipping in attachment).

Muslims see themselves, during the prayer, surrounded by a crowd of non - Muslims, sitting on benches and watching ‘the performance’.<sup>83</sup>

This, the author concludes, cannot be true Islam. These performances gave a definitely wrong impression of what real Islam was about: “Under those circumstances, the Berlin mosque (...) can never be the center of the Muslim community“.<sup>84</sup>

Whoever wrote this article certainly had been an intimate observer of the comings and goings in the Ahmadiyya mosque and mission house. However, against the move toward modernization, which both Europe and the Muslim world overwhelmingly desired, Habibur Rahman and those around him seem to have held up a frozen, timeless image of Islam, which they ‘knew’ by right of birth. Acting along lines of purity and danger (Mary Douglas), this circle set out to re-draw its borders without as much as putting their views to discussion. At least, among the many lectures held in the mosque we do not find any offers in that direction. Rahman’s main instrument of communication exhausted itself in a rhetoric of hate, of which many instances survive.

Unfortunately the times were propitious for him. Muslim émigrés in Berlin who suspected converts of eroding ‘their’ religion expected Nazis to support them. But their extensive cooperation during the war fall outside the scope of this contribution - they will be treated elsewhere.<sup>85</sup>

There exists a group photograph in the *Moslemische Revue*, dating 1936, in which we see the DMG community listening to a sermon in the mosque.<sup>86</sup> What the viewer beholds are European men and women sitting on wooden chairs in close proximity to one another. Although it seems to be cold and the congregation huddles in winter coats, many of the women are bare headed, and so are the men. In front of the pulpit one catches a glimpse of two men in Arab headgear sitting on the floor. Is this what our author is talking about? On close inspection, the congregation creates a vaguely Lutheran impression but there is also no doubt that these are Muslims celebrating the annual ‘Id festival. What can be seen then is an instance of modern Muslim ritual communication. It is but one instance of the bridge Ahmadiyya tried to build between east and west, Christianity and Islam, between the need for modernization in the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>84</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>85</sup> Gerdien Jonker, *Missionising Europe. The Ahmadiyya Quest for Adaptive Globalisation 1990 – 1965*. Leiden: EJ Brill, 2015.

<sup>86</sup> *Moslemische Revue* ( 1936): 1.

Muslim world and European visions of progress and of the “future man”.

### By Way of Conclusion

Religion is not a primordial entity thrown into the world from outer space. In the eyes of its adherents it may be inspired, even ruled by divine power. But the ways in which this inspiration takes form is entirely a matter of human creativity. Every religion has made its appearance in a specific societal setting, creating a tradition that shaped social communication and in its turn was shaped by society. As societies change, reform and renewal of that tradition constitute a necessary and never-finished task.

It was shown in this contribution that Muslim missionaries from British-India in Berlin fostered different ideas of how to modernize their home country, a struggle to which they thought the modernization of Islam a central feature, and in which they invited the Germans to join. In the early 1920s, when revolutionary movements still held Germany in their grip, Kheiri's invitation to ‘world revolution’ attracted a circle of German and Eastern European students, intellectuals and artists. In a very different fashion, Sadr-ud-Din approached the modernization from the viewpoint of personal progress: all the German seekers had to do was to find the ‘right’ roots in themselves.

But not only missionaries searched for change. Between the Great War and the mass annihilation with which the Nazis engulfed the world in 1939, many Germans also desperately groped for ideas, which allowed them to help shape the future in ways they deemed appropriate, and in which pacifism, progress, the bridging of east and west, the meeting of minds, personal well-being and spirituality played a considerable part. Borrowing from, even transgressing to other religions was only one means to this end. Such Germans considered ‘modern’ a personal way of progress and a shield against all those who wanted to turn back the clock and re-establish the frozen traditions and power structures of a bygone age.

In the tumultuous years at the end of the Weimar era, when an aggressive authoritarian form of modernity took hold of the masses, this religious market was put to the test. Not only the Indian Muslims in Berlin, Arab, Afghan and Tatar Muslims were also focused on reforming their homelands and making them politically independent. Islam was assigned very different roles in that process. Muslim emigrés gathered in the IGB perceived their religion as something that kept them bonded but which did not necessarily call for outer change. Siding with the Nazi

regime in an attempt to gain power, the IGB even tried to ward off renewal and withdrew to a primordial vision of 'pure Islam'.

On the contrary, Ahmadiyya Muslims tried to build a bridge between the different cultural traditions with the aim of fertilizing and reforming both Christianity and Islam. In the interwar years this was their hallmark of religious modernity. Acting in a political constellation, in which missionaries and converts embraced personal progress as the essence of modernity, conversion itself became a two-way process. And here lays the meaning of Ahmadiyya activity for European (trans) cultural history: In their attempt to cross the gulf between east and west, missionaries smoothed the way, borrowing from, and adapting to Western thought wherever it was of use. Paralleling religious with intellectual exchange, missionaries allowed their converts to adapt its foreign knowledge, ritual and moral traditions to more familiar patterns. What they shared, their common ground so to speak, was a taste for experiment. In a joint effort, missionaries and converts created a totally different image of Islam, one in which Germans marveled and in which they were able to find consolation.

In retrospect, Muhammed Ali's welcome of the new regime in 1933 because of its "tackling the wealth and sex problem" may sound naïve in the face of the mass murder that followed. But how was he to know? Did the DMG realize it was playing with fire? Individual members continued to believe in changing European civilization through a re-modeling of the self and shaping a Muslim "future man", a vision that was strong enough to keep liberals, fascists, and Jews assembled under one roof. The bond lasted until the Nazi element took over. That was in 1935, in line with the gathering Nazi strength. Taking this into account, the interaction between Muslim missionaries and their host society engendered fresh ideas and knowledge transfers in many different directions. Modernization and progress were the key words around which communication circulated; converts who had surmounted cultural borders simply continued to pursue these central notions in their search for salvation. Muslims like Habibur Rahman, who clung to a primordial image of religion, probably never noticed the momentum and urgency of their quest.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> In 1933, when the NSDAP came to power, this party already counted 2,5 million members. To avoid the influx of lip service paying members, the regime put a stop on new memberships until 1937. Once this was removed, membership mounted to 11,5 million on a total population of 66 million inhabitants.

([http://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder\\_dokumente/00757/index-11.html.de](http://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder_dokumente/00757/index-11.html.de)).

<sup>ii</sup> The competing Ahmadiyya Qadiani branch tried to do the same but for different reasons failed (Jonker 2014, 2015).

<sup>iii</sup> Opfer-Kreis für die National-Sozialistische Deutsche Partei = "Circle of Victims of the National-Socialist German Party". The NSDAP was founded in 1920, engaged in anti-Semitism and street terror, and soon attempted a coup under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. Members who were imprisoned on account of this coup later acquired the status of victim; SS = Schutzstaffel der NSDAP = "Protective Arm of the NSDAP"; (Deutsche) Arbeitsfront = "German Work Front". The latter was founded in 1933, a few days after the annihilation of the trade unions.

<sup>iv</sup> In 1936, Hafiz Abdul Rahman Peshawari, leader of the Afghan pan - Islamist movement, warned the Foreign Office against him, stating that Rahman was "a Luna park dancer and a communist" (AA/4: 20.03.1936). Spotting him as a troublemaker and denunciator, the Foreign Office kept its distance (AA/4: 1936, et passim). Rahman ended up working in the war propaganda department.

<sup>v</sup> The list features a mix of Muslim émigrés and new Muslims, counting 163 members, a quarter of whom have European names. In the ensuing correspondence ten more new Muslims were established. Some of the known members however, notably the female halves of converted couples, are never mentioned.

<sup>vi</sup> After Kheiri quarrelled with the Islamia, he wrote adopted Muslim names in parentheses only.

<sup>vii</sup> In his first book "Oil and Blood in the Orient" (1928), Nussimbaum poses as the heir to an old Azerbaidjani Muslim oil dynasty in Baku. But in 2009, Fuhrmann, himself an economist with Azerbaidjani specialization, claimed to be in the possession of Nussimbaums' birth certificate from a Kiev synagogue. For reasons of his own, he did not publish this document. What Fuhrmann did publish though was an internal report of the German Secret Service (Gestapo), which in 1935 had arrived at the same conclusion ([www.essadbey.de](http://www.essadbey.de)).

<sup>viii</sup> There is a Dr. H. Banning in the 1924 Berlin address book who lived in Berlin - Wilmersdorf and practiced as a public prosecutor. Since most visitors of the Wilmersdorfer mosque lived within walking distance, there is fair chance he is the one.

<sup>ix</sup> "Endlich sind wir im Reich!" (Finally we are in the Reich!), in *Moslemische Revue* (1938): 94. For 1934, we find Fischer's name on the DMG board, proof that for some time at least he was an active member.