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Contemporary German Literature

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Religion and Identity in Germany Today

Doubters, Believers, Seekers in
Literature and Film

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Introduction

These essays were first delivered as papers at a colloquium held in Swansea in July 2008. The initial suggestion for religion as a colloquium topic, which came from Dieter Stolz, seemed apposite for a number of reasons. These circled around identity and conflict in much of Europe, not just Germany and Austria, and a clash, if such is the right word, between an intellectually secularised 'host' culture and perceptions of fundamentalist Islamic militancy. Our underlying assumption is that novels, plays, poetry, and films explore questions of faith and non-faith as well as transcendence and its lack in ways which other forms of more discursive writing cannot. Problems immediately became apparent, however. Whereas a topic like literature and politics, even in times ostensibly dominated by consensus on the major issues of the day, would have excited immediate interest, religion was not a theme which many non-believing participants initially felt comfortable with. Whether British or German, academics in our field tend to come from non-religious backgrounds with often only a rudimentary grounding in Christian teaching and the Bible. There is a sense common to the five essays in the middle of the volume, which concentrate on 'white' German writers, that both the literary critics and the writers and poets whose work they examine were obliged to reinvent a set of terms and concepts to address the most ancient of literary themes: God. It is at first sight more straightforward to discuss Jewish self-perception and Muslim identity and their reflection in contemporary culture, which are addressed in the first and third of the three essay clusters. The authors of these essays were able to work within already established fields of enquiry. The drawback here, however, is that in society Jews are supposed to be Jews and Muslims Muslims. Writers and film-makers, not unlike other human beings, prefer to question categories than to be placed in them.

We have arranged the contributions in three sections or clusters, though in the hope that the boundaries between them will blur, and without marking the divisions formally in this volume. In the opening essay Mona Körte

shows how the outside expectation to be Jewish has affected the writings of a number of German writers of Jewish extraction. (How even to refer to Jewish Germans can be a fraught question; indeed one still reads of 'Germans' and 'Jews' as if the two groups were distinct from one another.) Jewish writers, like the Jewish characters in the trio of films discussed by Matthias Uecker in the second essay, have to rediscover Jewishness, which may have been discarded by their assimilationist parents and grandparents. They do so under pressure from a society which seems to want them to behave in a certain way. Esther Dischereit and Barbara Honigmann are standard bearers of German-Jewish identity, whether they want that role or not. They ultimately decide to embrace it and make it their own. The Austrian writer Anna Mitgutsch is a slightly different case. She won plaudits for her first novel *Die Züchtigung* (1985) about the abusive treatment meted out by a mother to her daughter in rural Austria in the post-war period. One of the causes of this abuse was the family's social isolation, which was itself a result of their difference from the other families, who considered them socially inferior because of their rumoured connection with gypsies. In Andrea Reiter's account of Mitgutsch's later fiction, this difference is read as an encoded expression of Jewishness. Mitgutsch has since written several times directly about Jews and Jewish identity, setting her fiction in both Israel and America. Reiter locates it more readily in an American literary context, but acknowledges that Mitgutsch can be less sure of her touch in her depiction of Jewish life and mores than American writers such as Philip Roth or Woody Allen.

In non-Jewish films or literature about Jews and Jewishness old stereotypes and clichés, regarding rituals, appearance, religious observance, and mentalities abound. Offence can easily be taken, sometimes where none is intended. In a discussion of three recent films depicting Jewish Germans *as Jews* Matthias Uecker shows what a hazardous undertaking the subject matter can be, especially given that the actors and film directors are unlikely to have Jewish blood themselves. Uecker points out that there is a tradition, which was born of a different necessity in the nineteenth century, of non-Jewish actors playing Jewish roles: Jews themselves were not permitted to perform on stage. Today, Jewishness has to be 'performed', but only in Dani Levy's *Alles auf Zucker* (2005) is this done without condescension. Körte's account of best-selling author Wolfgang Schlink's story 'Die Beschneidung' about a love affair between a gentile German young man and a Jewish young woman from

New York picks up on the criticism that Matthias Lorenz made of the story in an essay published in a recent volume on anti-Semitism in contemporary German literature (or at least perceptions of it from some critical quarters). For Körte and Lorenz, Schlink's anti-Semitism lies in his uncritical inclusion of clichés. The conclusion that his story seems to invite is that the Germans, or the non-Jewish majority of them, have a harder time of it in encounters with Jews than the Jews themselves do in the land of their former persecutors. A different reading of 'Die Beschneidung' may be possible. Its last line, in which the New Yorker reveals that she had not noticed that her lover had got himself circumcised, shows the whole complex could be in the mind of the German. Matthias Lorenz made his name with a PhD thesis about anti-Semitism in the novels and writings of Martin Walser. Stuart Parkes, who has spent his career commenting on Walser (and whose name does not appear in Lorenz's bibliography), is not the only Walser critic to be baffled by Lorenz's allegations and the critical logic which he employs to make them. As Gerhard Schröder, while Federal Chancellor from 1998–2005 a proponent of a newly self-confident foreign policy and attitude towards the Nazi past, is said to have supported Walser in some of his more controversial statements, these debates take us to the heart of contemporary thinking on the identity of the Berlin Republic.

Non-Jewish Germans are as uncertain about their relationship with a supernatural being, which they may call God, or religious tradition, which they still understand as Christian. Stefan Neuhaus opens the middle section of the volume with some thoughts on a recent runaway bestseller by a popular television presenter, whose account of his pilgrimage to St Iago de Compostela impresses by its sales figures alone (3 million and counting). Hape Kerkeling finds God in himself, which is an answer to his search that his predecessors in past centuries on the pilgrim route could have recognised. In postmodern novels, however, such as those written by Helmut Krausser, religion is only quoted and religious mythology assembled to make a system of signs which could in theory be replaced by any other such system which took its components from another source. Other writers, whose contributions to the topic are discussed by Axel Schalk, are playful and satirical in a variety of ways, but united in their conviction that a figure such as the Pope, who features in the title of a novel by Hans Ulrich Treichel, cannot be the *fons et origo* of meaning. Christian symbolism does not have to be relegated

to such a subsidiary role. Robert Gillett, who as so often in such collections as this, writes the only contribution on poetry, shows how for the ex-GDR poet Thomas Rosenlöcher the proposition that 'das Heilige [muß] bleiben' is 'a properly unthinkable demand', both 'for the dogmatically materialist ideologues in the former East, and for the banally materialist majority in the now unified West'. Rosenlöcher's modern appropriation of traditional forms and imagery expresses the ineffable in a uniquely contemporary but time-honoured fashion. The dramatist Werner Fritsch is concerned with nothing less than the resacralisation of life and sees theatre to be a surrogate liturgy, which, as Rhys Williams pointed out at the Swansea colloquium, aligns him with some of the practices and assumptions of the Expressionists in the first two decades of the last century. Sinéad Crowe argues that he is parasitic on the religion that he tries to usurp as his plays are saturated in religious imagery. A contemporary novelist who has attempted for our times what has often pre-occupied religious writers and film-makers by adapting 'the greatest story ever told' is Patrick Roth. Keith Bullivant sets out how he refers to an alternative version of the New Testament and was inspired by Pasolini and numerous other Hollywood films. The result is a trilogy of novels which are rich in allusive meanings, making demands on their readers which embody the challenge made by Christ to humanity.

In the third section of five essays we see how Muslim identity can be contested, traduced, constructed, imposed, and redesigned in multiple, usually quite urgent ways, which are reflected and queried in more thoughtful literary writing. The new Germany needs new thinking on this question. Monika Shafi shows up the flaws, which amount to nothing more than basic prejudices, in the pamphlets of one of the last century's great German Enlighteners and polymaths, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, whose theory of the 'radical loser' tars the world's one billion Muslims with the same broad brush. Enzensberger's dogmatism mirrors that of his fundamentalist adversaries and his method of argument contradicts his own earlier pronouncements on the essay as form. The Turkish German Zafer Şenocak similarly 'others' and demonises Islam in the context of the '9/11' terror attacks, demanding that Islam adopt the European Enlightenment. Shafi finds both writers' prescriptions unrealistic to the point of adding to the set of problems they purport to want to solve. Two writers born outside Germany, one of whom has written a book about Islam in the Netherlands, paint a different picture. Shafi applies Tom

Cheesman's comment on Feridun Zaimoğlu to Ilija Trojanow's account of a pilgrimage to Mecca, to the effect that it is a 'rare affirmation of religious experience'. The British Dutchman Ian Buruma values both sides' experiences in his account of the murder of the film-maker Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam by a Moroccan immigrant incensed by his film about Islam. Trojanow and Buruma position themselves between different worlds. The Holocaust survivor and novelist Ralph Giordano, who for a number of decades has been an influential spokesman for Germany's Jewish minority, has adopted positions not unlike Enzensberger's in the heated debates which split opinion in the ancient Catholic city of Cologne on whether or not plans to build a large mosque should go ahead. Michael Hofmann surveys the various viewpoints in this debate before taking the unusual step in a publication of this kind of setting out what in his view should be done to put relations between the factions on a sustainable basis of mutual respect.

An essay about Hubert Fichte may not properly belong in a volume on the contemporary scene as he died in 1986, but his work carried on appearing after his death and in Mario Fuhse's view that on Islam has not yet been afforded the attention it deserves. Fichte's philological investigation of the Koran, albeit in French translation, builds on little known work done in the Arab world itself which approaches the holy book as an historical text, committed to memory centuries before it was written down. Fichte writes, however, in a German tradition which today includes Michael Roes and which reaches back past Canetti, whose seminal account of a visit to Marrakesh is Fichte's intertextual reference point, to Goethe. As Julian Preece shows with respect to Trojanow's writing on Richard Burton, identities can be forged in the eyes of the 'other'. All are artificial constructs which cannot capture the essence of a human being, especially not one as protean as Burton who impersonated foreign roles. Trojanow shows too, perhaps unwittingly, that the East and Islam have their own preconceived notions of non-Muslims and are no less inclined to cultural and religious chauvinism. In his great novel *Der Weltensammler*, each fictional observer/narrator of Burton comes away from the experience transformed and no longer certain that terms employed to categorise individuals have validity. Frauke Matthes takes up some of the same points to explain Feridun Zaimoğlu's purpose in his series of monologues by young German-Turkish women for performance on stage, *Schwarze Jungfrauen*. This is pseudo-documentary theatre because the point is not that

these women somehow exist and dictated their speeches to the anthropologist dramatist whose role is to reproduce them. Zaimoğlu confronts German audiences with something like the inverse of what he perceives their perception of young female Turks living in their midst to be. It is a play about images reflected in images and as such shows how a literary treatment of an essentially ideological question cuts through that ideology. Aiding understanding of how meanings are made is the contribution that culture makes to religion in the context which is addressed in all these essays.