Inside the Mosque
Muslim Practices of Diversity and Joint Action in Switzerland

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1   Introduction

As a country of migration, Switzerland features one of the most diverse societies in Europe. People from a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds now call Switzerland home, contributing significantly to everyday life within a dynamic society. However, such a constellation requires the constructive action of various social actors in order to ensure a peaceful coexistence. These actors include, among others, religious communities, which provide significant services within society. In order to gain insight into the work of these actors, this chapter deals with Switzerland's Muslim community and its contribution to conviviality within its own community. The community is characterized by a strongly diverse composition of members who identify themselves through a distinct set of characteristics. However, these must not be understood as fixed boundaries which would prevent inter- as well as cross-community cooperation. For it is the Islamic faith which brings this diverse spectrum of actors together through joint actions. However, to gain a better understanding of conviviality among Switzerland's Muslim communities, this chapter takes a closer look at the mosque. As the main platform of religious life, it is this "multifunctional site of prayer" (Ceylan 2013: 73) where Muslim communities articulate their practices of diversity and joint actions within the fold of Islam.

This chapter is divided into five parts. The first section briefly defines the concept of conviviality that underlies this study. Part two introduces the Swiss Muslim community as the protagonist of conviviality by pointing out its main characteristics. Section three sets forth the main part of this chapter by dealing with practices of conviviality in Swiss mosques based on the Friday sermon, the month of fasting for Ramadan, and female theologians, before discussing the overall significance of conviviality within Swiss mosques. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the chapter's main findings and provides an outlook for further prospective research in this field.

The findings in this contribution mainly stem from the results of a Ph.D. project that I submitted to the University of Fribourg in 2022 (Amiti 2024). The dissertation

dealt with the impact of diaspora on the understanding of Islam for Albanian-speaking imams working in Switzerland. Therefore, I analyzed their Friday sermons, which I first recorded in the mosques and analyzed later using qualitative content analysis. The main aim of the study was to establish a system of categories based on the sermons that depict the relationship between diaspora and their understanding of religion. Hence, the project enabled me, on the one hand, to engage in a close exchange with the imams and conduct an in-depth study of their sermons and, on the other hand, to learn more about the history and structures of Albanian-speaking mosques as well as the activities and services which they provide.

In addition to the imams, the research further delves into the experience of female actors working in Swiss mosques as permanent or freelance theologians. Like the imams, they work with a diverse and targeted audience whereby they especially address women and women's issues and provide religious education classes. The main subject of the research consists of the lectures and services which they provide to the mosques.

2   Defining Conviviality

Before this chapter turns to its actual question, the underlying concept of conviviality must first be elaborated. A quick examination of the English definition of "conviviality" yields the understanding of a cheerful get-together in an enjoyable atmosphere accompanied by food and drinks (The Cambridge English Dictionary). While this definition has merit, it is initially based on the English translation of conviviality. This chapter, however, builds on the Roman origin of conviviality which goes back to the Spanish concept of "convivencia". Convivencia reflects the medieval period of the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule, which is understood as a time of tolerance and coexistence between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Europe (Catlos 2021: 428–429). Gutiérrez Rodríguez emphasizes in this regard that, unlike the connotations in English, the Spanish term "also has moral implications as it emphasizes a communal being in the world, one that is tied to a respectful and caring living together" (2020: 107). Given the diversity within Switzerland's Muslim community and its existence in a pluralistic society, Gutiérrez Rodríguez's reference is of great importance, as will become apparent in the course of this chapter.

Yet, as an analytical framework the chapter draws on Paul Gilroy's (2004: xi) concept of conviviality "as a process of cohabitation and interaction". According to Gilroy, different cultural communities not only interact tolerantly with each other, but are actively part of a process of mutual exchange which leads to a hybridization between cultures. He contrasts this understanding of coexistence with the concept of multiculturalism, which he believes is no longer suitable (2004: xi). Gilroy points out that the concept of conviviality enables the affirmation and acceptance of diversity "without restaging communitarian conceptions of ethnic and racial difference" (Hemer et al. 2020: 2). This is because the focus is no longer on identities but on everyday practices of local communities (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2020: 107).

In other words, this chapter is grounded in an understanding of conviviality that sees cultural communities as contributing to social cohesion through dialogue and collaboration and through this they become more inclusive, thereby embracing complexities and

cultural diversity. In doing so, however, they continue to adhere to the characteristics which they perceive as pivotal for their own identity.

3 Muslims in Switzerland

According to the Federal Statistical Office, Muslims form the largest religious minority in Switzerland (Bundesamt für Statistik 2023). In 2018, the country was home to 371,680 Muslims, which corresponded to 5.3% of the population. This figure included persons aged 15 and older residing in a private household in Switzerland. If children aged 0–14 are added, this results in an additional 110,000 people, bringing the total number of Muslims living in Switzerland in 2018 to approximately 480,000 (Schmid et al. 2018: 10).

The Muslim community is in many respects distinguished by a diverse set of characteristics. While one segment of the Muslim population was either born or at least socialized in Switzerland from a young age, another segment migrated from abroad into the country. The majority of Muslims who do not have Swiss citizenship trace their origins back to southeastern Europe and Turkey. In addition, other major segments of the Muslim population originate from the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), Central and South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe (Bundesamt für Statistik 2012–2016).

In the case of Switzerland, it is important to point out that 60% of all Muslims either trace their origins back to southeast Europe or hail from a family with roots in that region. When Switzerland was experiencing an economic boom in 1960, it secured a recruitment agreement with the former Yugoslavia, which allowed Yugoslav citizens to work as seasonal workers in Switzerland (Behloul 2007: 198–199). Among these were laborers from the Albanian-speaking communities of present-day Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia, Bosniak Muslims, and further Muslim minorities from the former Yugoslav republics (Matteo Gianni 2010: 17). However, when political unrest increased after the death of Josip Broz Tito, the Yugoslav communist leader, and the Yugoslav wars broke out in the 1990s, the guest workers in Switzerland exercised their right to family reunification. This led hundreds of thousands of people to settle in Switzerland on a long-term basis due to the uncertain future in their countries of origin (Burri Sharrani et al. 2010: 25).

Migration to Switzerland exposed the guest workers' families to a new social environment which had a lasting impact on their lives. On the one hand, they had to make sure that they were able to enter the Swiss labor market and to enroll their children in schools in order to facilitate their integration process. But there was, on the other hand, also the need to continue to maintain cultural and religious practices. Migrants therefore started to set up meeting sites which, among other things, functioned as places of worship. In other words, this meant that prayer rooms, as precursors to today's mosques, were initially founded in order to preserve the migrant communities' culture, identity, and language of origin. The establishment of mosques and mosque associations primarily as religious sites to fulfill the needs of Muslims as a religious community followed decades later, when the former guest workers and the younger generation gradually became an integral part of the Swiss society (Behloul 2007: 199). Samuel Behloul describes this process as "de-ethnification", which alludes to the awareness of Swiss Muslim com-

munities to distinguish between cultural and religious practices as their perceptions of identity and integration started to diverge over the decades (Behloul 2014: 49).

A second feature that defines this heterogeneous Muslim community are their religious practices and interpretations of Islam. It is important to note that the majority of Muslims in Switzerland identify themselves as secular and non-practicing. This means that the discussion about the active practice of Islam in Switzerland concerns only a minority of Muslims (De Flaugergues 2016: 13). Sunni Islam is the predominant sect among practicing Muslims, while a small number profess Shia Islam (Swiss Centre for Islam and Society).

The Muslim community's diversity is furthermore very well reflected in its religious structures. Today, about 270 mosques and Muslim prayer rooms exist in Switzerland (Schmid et al. 2021: 227). The establishment of these religious sites is closely intertwined with the background of Muslim migrants, as mentioned before, who built ethnically and linguistically affiliated mosques after they arrived in Switzerland. Depending on their needs and interests, the mosques organize themselves both on a cantonal as well as federal level in the form of umbrella organizations (Schmid et al. 2021: 228). Among the biggest actors are the *Föderation islamischer Dachverbände Schweiz* (FIDS), which aims to unify cantonal umbrella organizations in Switzerland, the *Dachorganisation albanisch-islamischer Gemeinschaften Schweiz* (DAIGS), which is the largest umbrella organization of Albanian-speaking associations, the *Union Vaudoise des Associations Musulmanes* (UVAM), which aims to unify Muslim associations in the canton of Vaud, and the *Vereinigung der islamischen Organisationen Zürich* (VIOZ), which unifies Islamic organizations in the canton of Zurich.

While the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation lays down the principles governing religious life, such as freedom of religion, the responsibility for recognizing religious communities is delegated to the respective cantons. Moreover, the process of recognition by the state is a highly political issue and thereby often the subject of controversies (Reber/Aharchaou 2020: 1–2). For this reason, some cantons, such as Zurich, have created alternative paths in order to simplify cooperation between the state and religious actors (Reber/Aharchaou 2020: 18–17). These debates have proved to be a protracted and complex affair in recent years. Political blockades and controversies have led to the situation that Islam has not yet been recognized under public law in any of the 26 cantons (Reber/Aharchaou 2020: 21).

For the Muslim community, this means, for example, that they are not able to establish Muslim burial sites, to enroll children in Islamic religious classes at public schools, or to ask for Muslim chaplains in hospitals and prisons (Reber/Aharchaou 2020: 2–3). However, cantons willing to foster cooperation with Muslim communities have developed alternative paths in recent years to strengthen cooperation between the two sides. Significant achievements have been reached in the matters of Muslim graveyards, religious educations, and Islamic chaplaincy.

4   Muslim Actions of Conviviality in Switzerland

As shown above, the Muslim community in Switzerland is characterized by great diversity, which also affects its organizational structures. If one looks at the composition of the mosques, one finds that linguistic and national characteristics often determine their composition. Yet, even if religious life at these sites of worship takes place mainly within a particular community, Muslims have still developed ways to promote inter-communitarian exchange nationwide. Before exploring the concrete case studies in the following section, the meaning of the mosque as a convivial platform must first be explained in more detail.

The term mosque is a translation of the Arabic word "masjid" and translates as "a place of prostration", which goes back to the Arabic verb "to prostrate oneself with the forehead touching the ground; to prostrate oneself; to worship; to adore." From an Islamic perspective, this description implies the prescribed five daily prayers (Wehr 1985: 552). If one holds to the linguistic definition, as used in the Quran and the Hadith, then any place where one prostrates oneself and performs the prayer in this sense assumes the function of a mosque (Frishman 2007: 32). Today, a mosque is mainly associated with the building that serves as a place of worship for Muslims with its corresponding architectural features.

The history of Switzerland's mosques is closely connected to the process of Muslim migration to the country. Initially, mosques served Muslim communities not only as places of worship, but also as cultural sites where migrants maintained their customs and traditions from their countries of origin. These localities then laid the foundation for the emergence of mosques as purely religious sites. The close ties between mosques and their respective communities meant that mosques were built along linguistic and ethnic lines and mainly attracted people from the same community. However, when the possibility of returning to their countries of origin increasingly dwindled, Muslim communities ushered in a process of "de-ethnification of religion" (Behloul 2014: 49). They were keen to distinguish between a cultural and a religious consciousness, so that today mosques mainly fulfill religious functions. However, today, the cultural aspect is still reflected in the similar backgrounds of the majority of attendees and their shared language of communication (Schmid/Trucco 2019: 6–7). But in practice these places of worship are open to all people regardless of their linguistic or national affiliation.

Before moving on to the case studies, it is important to note that mosques are not sacred buildings. This means that they can be used for secular purposes too (Stöckli 2020: 54). In Switzerland mosques serve, in addition to places for congregational prayer, as multifunctional facilities which fulfill various purposes and needs of the Muslim communities (Ceylan 2013: 73). In addition, mosques in the Western diaspora perform social functions (Schmitt 2003: 31) by acting as focal points for various socio-political activities such as supporting the emancipation of their members at their place of residence, advocating for the interests of Muslims, and striving for the recognition of Muslim identity (Maussen 2005: 8–10). In Islamic countries, on the other hand, these kinds of services are provided by independent institutions offering their expertise to the population (Cesari 2004: 183–205).

The following case studies will illustrate the diverse composition of mosques in Switzerland, on the one hand, and their ways of fostering conviviality, on the other. Section 4.1 deals with the Friday prayer which constitutes the most important weekly gathering of worshippers in mosques. Section 4.2 depicts events promoting venues for exchange and dialogue during Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, before concluding with the last section, 4.3, which deals with female theologians who constitute a central pillar in the women's divisions of the mosques.

4.1 Friday Prayer

As part of the congregational prayers, the Friday prayer and its corresponding sermon form the "highlight" among the acts of worship carried out in a mosque. Due to its religious significance, the Friday prayer attracts a much larger number of attendees and ensures that mosques are filled and sometimes even overcrowded. The prayer takes place every Friday at noon and is preceded by a sermon. Despite its importance, Friday must not be assumed as a day of rest. European orientalists promoted the image of a "Muslim Sunday" for a long time, on which no work is done and only the service in the mosque is attended (Goitein 2012). Such an account stands in contrast to the Quran which supports conducting commerce on Fridays and in this sense work: "Once the prayer is over, disperse throughout the land and seek the bounty of Allah [...]" (Quran: surah 62, verse 10).

As mosque employees, imams lead the congregational prayers, which include Friday prayers, and they assume the role of preacher. An imam is characterized by theological training at an Islamic educational institution and in the art of reciting the Quran (Aerts 2020). Unlike in Muslim countries, where imams mainly perform a religious function within the mosque, in Western Europe they perform a larger set of tasks in order to meet the needs of the Muslim community. Therefore, mosques offer a range of additional services, depending on the skills and capacities of the imams, such as religious festivals, marriage ceremonies, funeral ceremonies, counselling, mediation, Arabic language courses, religious education, and cultural activities, which would usually be provided by different specialized institutions in Muslim societies (Cesari 2004: 183–205). Furthermore, Swiss imams also act as bridge builders as they strive to establish a functioning relationship between Islam and the public (Sèze 2018: 268). Still, leading congregational prayers and the Friday prayer continues to be main task of an imam in Switzerland.

Since Friday prayers may only be performed in the community and in the mosque, these places of worship turn into regional hotspots every Friday, attracting visitors from all directions. Accordingly, there are often people among the participants who are neither members nor part of the community. Some seek out the mosque for practical reasons, such as proximity to their place of work or education, or specifically because of their cultural background. The number of visitors who are neither members nor part of the mosque communities is very large on Fridays. This is why mosques have adapted over the years, especially from a language perspective, by communicating in several languages and delivering part of the sermon in the local language, thus expanding their reach to all attendees. Mosques therefore function as a gathering place for worshippers from different backgrounds on Fridays. The ethno-linguistic aspects that normally distinguish these

places of worship fade away on this day. This constellation sets in motion processes of mutual recognition and cooperation on both sides. The mosques are aware of their function as open places of worship, so they account for sufficient capacity to accommodate a large number of worshippers when planning the space. This in turn results in imams preaching not only in the language of the corresponding community, but also in the local language and, if necessary, in Arabic, in order to reach a wider audience. The attendees, and especially those from a different background, are in turn willing to overlook any theological and cultural differences and to compromise since their basic religious needs are met by the mosque (Amiti 2024: 5).

Albanian-speaking imams, whose Friday sermons were analyzed as part of my Ph.D. thesis, criticized mosques for their "ethnic and linguistic divisions" and the missed opportunities to diversify their structures. They particularly reproached the mosques' board members for their "ignorance" in not admitting applicants from outside the own ethnic communities into the mosque administration. According to the imams, such behavior led to exclusive practices, like the call to prayer, which was reserved solely for their own members. They instead plead for the establishment of heterogeneous associations which reflect the diverse spectrum of Muslims in Switzerland (Amiti 2024: 163–164).

4.2 Ramadan

According to Islam, Muslims are required to fast from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan. This kind of abstinence is intended to strengthen the piety of the believer so that the person refrains from reprehensible deeds and works on his or her bond with God. At the same time, Muslims are supposed to focus on studying the Quran, which according to Islamic tradition was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad during the month of Ramadan. Furthermore, during this month great importance is attached to the night prayer, or *tarawih*, which is performed with a congregation in the mosques (Plessner 2012). As in the case for the Friday prayer, this communal prayer also attracts a large number of visitors from different backgrounds due to its importance. Hence, these multifaceted spiritual demands, consisting of fasting, studying the Quran, and night prayer, increasingly shape the lives of practicing Muslims during Ramadan and consequently place increased emphasis on mosques as places of assembly. In this context, it is precisely those who are not regular attendees, or who do not identify themselves as practicing Muslims, who show up at the mosque, revealing how the month of fasting promotes the gathering of people in different contexts due to its convivial character (Halm 2018: 69).

During Ramadan, mosques become increasingly busy sites. Taking advantage of the large number of visitors, people in charge often inquire both inside and outside of Switzerland about charity projects that the community can support. Mosque construction projects in Switzerland are among the most prioritized projects which mosque attendees support. For this purpose, the respective communities are in close contact with each other throughout the country and informed about the various construction phases. Since in Switzerland such projects are financed through private funds, those responsible advertise their projects all the more intensively, especially during Ramadan (Amiti 2024: 97).

The exchange between communities during Ramadan does not only take place on a communal level. On the individual level the exchange of imams between mosques has established itself as another practice during Ramadan. For example, two mosques agree on a day when their imams visit the other community to give a guest lecture, which usually deals with a religious topic related to Ramadan. The lecture is often held after sunset when people have broken their fast and before night prayer. In order to attract a wide audience, guest lectures by imams occur on weekends. The program is furthermore advertised on social networks, which means that interested parties who are neither members nor regular visitors to the respective mosque also become aware of the event (Amiti 2024: 97).

Many mosques also use Ramadan to open their doors to the public by inviting people for a public *iftar* (breaking the fast). In addition to food and drink, the mosques also take the opportunity to offer tours of their premises, to give lectures on Islam, and to answer general questions from visitors. Especially due to the often-distorted discussions about Islam in Switzerland, the public events during Ramadan are seen as great opportunities for dialogue and for challenging prejudices (Amiti 2024: 157).

4.3 Female Theologians

Today, many Swiss mosques include female Muslim theologians in their activities. This phenomenon has developed over the past three decades in Europe where an increasing number of women are active as religious actors (Kalmbach 2012: 1). In Switzerland, for example, in Albanian-speaking mosques, women, in addition to their active membership, are taking on new functions including as religious teachers, instructors for Arabic, or public speakers, and thereby offering their own activities and building their own networks (Allenbach/Müller 2017: 283). So far, however, only a small number of mosques have a permanent women's group or employ a permanent female theologian. But where new mosques are being constructed, women are embedded in the mosque structures from the outset so that they can incorporate their experiences and preferences into these future mosques (Stöckli 2020: 71; 210–213).

Female theologians in Switzerland mostly work as freelancers and perform a variety of tasks. Especially those who are not embedded in fixed mosque structures enjoy great flexibility in their work, so that they often have a full schedule and travel throughout the country. Through their national activities, freelancers build a broad network of relationships with different communities. As a result, they gain notoriety in multiple locations and establish audiences with whom they interact with regularly. For example, there are women theologians who draw a group of women from different mosque communities in Switzerland at every event they attend. Others, in turn, not only work within their respective language communities but are also invited to other communities because of their popularity (Amiti 2024: 196–197).

5   Visualizing Conviviality

The case studies illustrated above provide an insight into convivial interactions among the Muslim communities of Switzerland. They comprise actions fostering social cohesion through dialogue and collaboration among Muslim communities, on the one hand, and processes of diversification, on the other hand, within an Islamic framework. Mosques constitute thereby the focal point of this study as they assert themselves as sites for collective religious activities and provide in this sense appropriate venues for the Friday sermon, Ramadan festivities, and the work of female Muslim theologians. This constellation is furthermore enhanced by the Swiss context which provides the general setting of the Muslim communities which, consequently, has a significant impact on their actions. Considering how these two aspects shape coexistence among the Muslims of Switzerland, the following section draws key conclusions for the concept of conviviality.

5.1   Heterogeneity Through Migration

The study of Friday sermons clearly indicates that migration promotes conviviality by diversifying the demographics of Swiss mosque attendees. Hence, long standing mosques, built by early Muslim migrant communities based on ethnic identities, today accommodate worshippers from a great variety of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, as mosque associations grew over time and their finances improved, they were able to move from industrial spaces into proper buildings, or even to build their own sites of worship, which meant that space increased too. This development granted women better access to the mosques, as prior to that primarily male worshippers joined congregational prayers due to the restricted space. As a result, female religious actors, like theologians, took advantage of this opportunity and established their own programs and study circles, establishing women's sections and working groups as an integral part of mosque structures (Stöckli 2020: 66; 71).

However, despite its diverse character, conviviality has also led to tensions as the boards of mosques and mosque associations are facing new challenges. Some mosques experienced a backlash when opening up their prayer halls and also when reforming their structures. Due to the increased attendance of worshippers from outside the own communities board members opted to further emphasize collaboration with their traditional base of support and to push convivial aspects to the fringes of their activities. In other words, visitors from all backgrounds are always welcome to participate in religious services. But as soon as they seek a greater say in the mosque's work, conflicts arise as the "old guard" fears a cultural loss in the face of greater structural diversity. Nonetheless, as the following section will reveal, conviviality has already initiated a process which makes structural changes inevitable in the long run.

5.2 From Mono- to Multilingual

When it comes to conviviality, language constitutes a core feature of the concept as seen in the three case studies presented here (Amiti 2024: 44). Many years have passed since imams in Switzerland have given up preaching exclusively in their native tongue in favor of the local language. Depending on the mosque's location, imams either preach in German (if based in central, northern, or eastern Switzerland), French (if based in western Switzerland), or Italian (if based in southern Switzerland). Mosque leaders are aware that holding sermons only in the language of a certain community is no longer justifiable. In order to spread their religious message, communication must be adopted to the local circumstances, which in this case means using the country's official languages that is spoken by the vast majority of mosque visitors. Although board members could officially determine the ethnic and linguistic character of their mosques, they still often opt to adapt to the actual circumstances which, in the case of language, are clearly determined by diversification. This process indicates a clear shift toward a convivial cohesion within mosques as these sites of worship discard their monolingual character in favor of multilingualism (Reeber 2000: 189).

5.3 Conviviality and Public Space

As this contribution has revealed so far, a key feature of conviviality consists of breaking up old structures in favor of a heterogeneous order and thereby promoting inclusion. However, the fact that this process does not always have the same effect across the board is demonstrated in the discussion of the recognition of Islam under public law in Switzerland. This is a prime example of the limits of conviviality to foster an understanding between two sides despite the potential of improved relations. In this case, political actors become obstacles to this rapprochement as many of them embrace the idea that Islam is not compatible with Swiss norms and values. This narrative buttresses the idea that Muslims are difficult to integrate into society and that they will pose more problems than offer enrichments for the country in the long term. Increased migration movements and the resulting challenges for European states have further fueled this discourse in recent years, so that supporters of a recognition of Islam by public law refrain from advocating for this out of fear of reputational damage and political setbacks (Reber/Aharchaou 2020: 21). Consequently, it can be said that the scope of acting within conviviality is limited until all contributors are willing to promote coexistence despite their differences.

6   Conclusion

In the case of conviviality within Swiss mosques, the concept has proven to be a driver of diversification and has been able to break up entrenched structures and promote the inclusive participation of worshippers from different backgrounds. This contribution, in other words, acknowledges the efforts of communities to account for social cohesion through dialogue and collaboration and thereby to embrace complexities and cultural diversity. As illustrated through the case studies, Muslims in Switzerland have significantly

adapted religious life within mosques to accommodate a broader mass of worshippers by adjusting structural, linguistic, and gender aspects to new circumstances. The reason for the success of these diversification efforts lies in the convivial characteristics of this process which allows communities to undertake joint actions without discarding elements which they perceive as pivotal for their own identity. However, conviviality also runs up against its limits when the actors involved lack a willingness to take joint action or when political blockades obstruct paths of cooperation. Furthermore, examples from the mosques illustrate that even if the involved actors are reasonable, tensions might still arise due to discomfort and uncertainty.

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