Alevism in Germany: On the Way to Public Recognition?

In the past decade, Alevism in Germany has gained a new impetus when – for the first time – a high court decision in February 2000 granted an Islamic organization (Islamic Federation Berlin) legal recognition as a religious community. According to the regulations, this organization now retains the right to give religious instruction at public schools. Since then, Islamic instruction has become a central issue of the integration policy.

Alevi response
The Alvis are far from hostile to this high court decision. Already three months later, the largest Alevi association in Berlin had applied for recognition as a religious community and for the establishment of lessons in Alevism at school. Since then, on behalf of associated organizations, the Federation of Alevi Communities, in Germany (AABF), made similar applications to the ministries in four other federal states. If Islamic instruction is introduced, Alevi argue, the interests of their children too must be taken into account. Analogous to denominational Christian instruction, there should not be only one type of Islamic instruction. In fact, separate instruction should exist for Sunni and Alevi. Since 1982, Alevian instructors have been teaching Alevism at school in Germany. A text of Alevism is breaking new ground. Until now there has not been any textbook of Alevism, which is associated with the religious instruction at school.

In Germany, there is a strong tendency to situate Alevism outside of Islam and even to understate its character as a religious community. In an inquiry on the most important features of Alevism recently made by the AABF, the majority voted for social aspects; the ‘fight against injustice’, ‘high ideals’, ‘aspirations toapped and ceremonies held a few times per year. The result was a clear religious orientation, which is associated with the religious instruction at school.

Alevism in the diaspora
Since 1960s Alevi are present in large numbers in Germany, until the end of the 1980s they did not appear in the public eye as a distinct community. They were organized on the basis of political affiliation, ranging from social democracy to the radical left. The community, which is based on traditional institutions, has been a source of ideological and political disagreements. In the diaspora, there is a strong tendency to situate Alevism outside of Islam and even to understate its character as a religious community.

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Alevism as a branch of Islam
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The Alevi have long been aware of the need to demonstrate the religious character of Alevism to the majority society. Since recently, the demand for religious instruction appears to be the desire for the recognition of their collective identity, stigmatized under the Ottomans and officially denied in the Turkish Republic. An Alevi religious instruction is a first step. If we succeed, Turkey can not continue to deny our distinctiveness.” The emphasis on the importance of religious instruction at school will fill the gap left behind by the breakdown of the traditional institutions.

How to teach Alevism?
There is no tradition of institutionalized learning in Alevism. In the past, the teachings were handed down orally within different theological traditions in Alevism, and the results of which are at the moment unforeseeable. Until now there has not been any textbook of Alevism, which is associated with the religious instruction at school.

The Alevi have to furnish proof of a coherent system of beliefs in Alevism. In the past, the teaching of Alevism at school in Germany was the product of the diaspora. But because the teaching of Alevism at school in Germany is nearly at hand – in Turkey it is still in the stage of preparation – the focus could very well be shifted to the diaspora.

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