Connecting Muslim Knowledge to the German School System

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Germany is becoming a multi-faith society at a rapid pace. The influx of foreign workers and a liberal policy towards fugitives and asylum-seekers made Islam the third religious factor in the country. To become citizens, the Muslim faith is slowly being institutionalized. In public discourse arguments flare up, exposing a deeply felt contrast between the Christian and Muslim faiths. On the part of the German public, Muslim claims to particularity (places for prayer in schools, separation for biology instruction) most often are connected with those of the second generation. As Muslims are suspected of serving political, not religious, aims. Questions are being publicly raised as to whether Muslim communities should be forced to adopt cultural ideals such as gender equality. The educational system offers a stage on which this battle over difference is acted out.

Muslim communities who wish to play a part in public schooling have to adapt to this legal framework. This is accelerated by a law enacted in 1996 that institutionalizes the right to religious instruction, with the option for pupils to be exempted from religious education. This has meant that many Muslim communities have begun to remodel their speech in order not to bear the consequence that they are obliged to connect the school teachings of a particular religious community to the German legislative system. This development decreases the community's ability to speak about or even recognize religious matters at hand. In public discourse, teachers unions, media and the majority of scholars as a rule express distrust of religious communities and sometimes declare religiousity a form of ignorance. When Muslim religiousity is at issue, many tend to see it as politics in disguise. Of course, there is a xenophobic component in the natural anxiety that arises in the context of representatives of various migrant communities that promote laicist views. Kemalists, Alevis and others continue to stress that Muslim religious organizations are a threat to democracy. Not surprisingly, most Muslim religious organizations, but especially those that are involved in political issues in the home country – in this case Turkey – are suspected of serving the interest of Turkish political groups and consequently are accused of being dishonest in their motives for teaching religion in school. Part of the media accuses them of undermining extremism and indoctrination.

Churches, on the contrary, increasingly seek contact with Muslim organizations, seeing them as natural allies in presenting religious viewpoints in the public sphere.

The Berlin case

Germany counts 3.2 million Muslims, the majority of which are of Turkish descent (75%), predominantly adhering to the Sunni (Hanbî) rite. And a high concentration of immigrants from southeast Asia, in Berlin the picture differs. As a rule Kurds follow the Shafiî rite and the imately 30% of all Kurds and Turks living in this city adhere to the Alevî rite, which is a brand new religious practice in Germany. In this way, a proposal for religious instruction in the working group on the Milli Gürbüz, the Federation has not turned into practice. Because of its connection to the Islamic Federation into the school system. The Islamic Federation explains its educational goals and methods, and where Muslims are concerned, non-Muslims often demonstrate a strong desire for participation in educational plans and for local administration to develop tools for communication. Muslim organizations in Berlin, Hessen, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Westphalia, North-Rhine-Westphalia, this idea and Baden-Württemberg, all agreeing upon the so-called ‘four plus one’ formula (four Sunni law schools plus one Shafiî, both Alevis and Ahmadiya), now have produced proposals for educational programmes. Furthermore, administrations of these states have organized informal working groups as future instruments for cooperation. In Berlin, proceedings seem to be well under way. Its law on freedom of religion, borne different from that of other states, allowed more room for religious partners.

The Berlin Working Group (of which the author is part) was established early in 2000 and consists of members of the Islamic Federation, representatives of Christian and Alevî teacher training and the Federation representatives of the State School Authority, politicians and scholars. In its meetings the Islamic Federation explains its educational plans and discusses particulars with those present.

For Germany’s schools religious privatization, as signalled by American scholars, seems to be the only way to make Muslim peculiarity socially acceptable. Some thirty years ago, Peter Berger observed in America that the pluralization of religion inevitably led to the privatization of all religions. The mechanism behind this societal re-adjustment seems to be motivated by the wish to live together in peace. When speaking about core religious questions in public, millions of people from different religious faiths have begun to remodel their speech in order not to be offensive. Religious judgements have been transposed to a more abstract level, leaving the explicit religious component out. In public discourse, not ‘topics like abortion, pre-marital sex, and homosexuality nowadays appear to be less under attack on religious grounds. Rather, their legitimacy is increasingly questioned with arguments that touch upon the supposed needs of society as a whole. The conditions in the German Federal Republic the state maintains the lead in educational matters, seeking cooperation with those religious communities that it acknowledges. In this legislative arrangement, religious communities are only responsible for religious content. Everything else remains the responsibility of the state. Bremen and Berlin are exceptions as these two states have taken steps to confer religious communities the full responsibility for religious instruction in state schools. Including the organization of teacher training and the development of pedagogical methods. The state supplies material and financial support by providing buildings, heating and electricity and pays 80% of the teachers’ salaries. After re-unification, most social democrats decided that religious instruction should be once more the responsibility of the state, with the exception of Brandenburg where religious instruction was banished from public schools altogether.

The conditions

In Germany the third religious factor today is Islam. The newness of this factor is obvious. Legal questions to do with the right to religious instruction and the consequences that this right has been granted to Muslim organizations are a threat to democracy. Not surprisingly, most Muslim religious organizations, but especially those that are involved in political issues in the home country – in this case Turkey – are suspected of serving the interest of Turkish political groups and consequently are accused of being dishonest in their motives for teaching religion in school. Part of the media accuses them of undermining extremism and indoctrination. Churches, on the contrary, increasingly seek contact with Muslim organizations, seeing them as natural allies in presenting religious viewpoints in the public sphere.

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