Self-Positioning and Islamic Instruction in Germany

Muslim institutions in Europe harbour growing expert knowledge. One example of this development comprises the syllabi for religious instruction of Muslim children that has developed in different European contexts. Among other things, these instruction programmes aim at positioning their clientele as religiously conscious in a particular community and society. The premises on which these positionings are based, as well as religious-theological justification and legitimation, form the focus of the above project that incorporates syllabus outlines and instruction materials from Germany, Austria and the Netherlands.

In Germany, two proposals for the transmission of Islamic knowledge are currently under discussion: the plan for Islamic instruction developed by the umbrella organization Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland (ZMD), and the programme developed by the pedagogical expert organization Institut für Internationale Pädagogik und Didaktik (IPD), both in Cologne. The latter proposal forms the first practical attempt by Muslims to provide Islamic religious instruction at two elementary schools in Berlin. In the following summary of preliminary results, it is important to remember that Germany is the only country within the sample without ‘practical experience’. Compared with the syllabus drafted for Muslims by the umbrella organizations, their first attempts in the area of syllabus development – the practical experience with religious instruction in Austria and the Netherlands is likely to have imparted the further development and reworking of programmes in these two countries.

Divergent concepts

The key concepts presented in the two German proposals for instruction are interpreted in quite different ways. For example, the planning committee at the IPD considers the concept of geschöpfliche oder creative creation to be the common ground of all humankind, and as such the starting point for its anthropology and worldview. The Zentralrat, on the other hand, does acknowledge this concept but in its own proposal it has made the umme of Muslims – rather than the concept of createdness – the centre of attention. These two concepts are vital to the respective attempts at self-positioning: the IPD places the Muslim children at the centre of society and of humankind in general, whereas the Zentralrat is concerned with ensuring a protective space for the umme as a minority under threat. Orienting the children towards a defensively defined umme, which functions as a haven or shelter, is thus the focus of the latter’s education programme.2

In both proposals, the notion of God remains abstract in the Zentralrat’s proposal to the extent that there is a deliberate absence of God as a thematic unit. This absence of theological concepts is characterised by the religious attitude of its syllabus planners: God is a self-evident cause of belief and at the same time remains distant. In sharp contrast to this, the instruction programme of the IPD mirrors the conviction that a relationship with God has to grow in every single child in a very special way, and that a personal relationship with the Creator is a basic condition for leading an Islamic life. The Zentralrat is oriented ultimately towards an ideal umme, and thus its proposal is open only at its margins to the non-Muslim world: regardless of where they live, Muslims remain within this umme, dealing primarily with and referring to each other. The Zentralrat’s planners affirm that religious instruction should seek to combat the disorientation experienced as crisis by the individual in a fragmented lifeworld, by providing a single orientation by means of a single religious perspective. This lifeworld is not understood in terms of individual learning. Instead, the salvaging perspective is predominant, and thus it is the attitude toward the sources themselves, that is the basis for the religious instruction offered.5 5. Ibid.: 39.

Religious sources

Analysis of the German Islamic syllables reveals that it is the attitude toward the sources – the particular perspective on the nature of the texts – that forms the basis for the planners’ relationships to the world. This basic attitude toward the religious sources determines which elements of the instruction plans consider to be crucial and non-negotiable for Islam and for being Muslim. Both programmes place different emphasis on the religious sources. In the conception of the IPD, the entire world is accessed as a space for the individual to live in, and interpretation dominates the IPD’s syllabus. The meanings of the Qur’an develop a process and dynamics that enable a continuous expansion of the definition of Islam as well as an incorporation of plural, contemporary ways of thinking and perspectives on life into the understanding of Islam. The Zentralrat, on the other hand, does not post an integrated relationship between text and world, since it presents religion predominantly as ritual and life, the meaning of the sources and becomes relatively independent from them. This idea of religious instruction remains focused on the teaching of precepts and prohibitions. However, the latter are limited to the ritual area defined as religious – a strategy to render Muslims compatible with different societies and establish themselves among other religious communities in Europe. In this regard, the syllabus of the Zentralrat has to be termed secular, because it assumes a separation between religion and other subsystems. By presenting religion as a space for the individual to live in, and interpretation dominates the IPD’s syllabus. The focus on the individual leads planners of the IPD to emphasize individual answers and search paths in the sense of ‘tight’ or ‘loose’ paths, all of which lead to God – thereby separating the concept of tariqa from its mystical background. In contrast, the Zentralrat is rather oriented toward the public structure of religion.6 Whereas tariqa refers to the individual path toward certainty and perfection, shari’a means the God-given – publicly visible – way of life of the entire community. But the Zentralrat incorporates only that part of the shari’a that regulates the relationships to God and reduces the umume to a legal code managing the totality of social life to moral comportment. According to the IPD, it can be said that the Islamic education envisaged by the Zentralrat respects individual freedom regarding the development of spiritual faculties or feelings and does not interfere with it, without however extending this freedom to the public face of religion and the visible commitment to a shared path of life. In turn, the emphasis on the primacy of the individual in the IPD’s logic by no means indicates a rejection of religion or religion as a cultural and ethical norm. Instead, religion claims validity for the entire, non-secularized lifeworld of the individual. This is what the syllabus planners call a ‘global’ perspective.

Neglecting the Islamic tradition

Both instruction plans under discussion tend toward an autonomous approach with regard to the interpretation of Qur’anic texts, and thus toward a neglect of tradition – understood as accumulated knowledge which is the result of centuries of research in various Islamic sciences. Both organizations do not cling to Islamic tradition, but rather avoid it or draw upon single elements that they deem brittle. As a result, their appropriation of tradition is highly selective, unsystematic and remains unarticulated. Neither the Zentralrat nor the IPD draws explicitly on classical exegesis. This neglect probably has to do with a lack of available experts, and perhaps a mistrust of a temporary nature. But it is above all due to the modernist tendency to approach the sources independently and not allow tradition to get in the way of addressing contemporary issues. It is not the quoting of authorities and variants of interpretation, their selection and presentation that prove the originality of an author. In the case of the instruction plans under discussion, it is rather the selection and presentation of the sources themselves, that is the Qur’an and hadith, which clarify the respectively religious-theological approaches. Both syllabi do not problematize the lack of explicit sources, even as a guarantee for a modernist understanding of religion, which the IPD presents as one method among others, whereas the Zentralrat claims it to represent Islam as such. The latter postpones the knowledge of the sources to such an extent that it does not even see the need to confront it in order to justify its own theological point of view.

Apart from the differences described above regarding the religious-theological positioning in the context of Islamic religious instruction, on the level of phenomenology the plans offer familiar, shared or at least similar definitions of Islam as based on the stated, ‘the true pillars’, the six articles of faith and other known elements. It seems obvious that these agreed-upon elements of Islam build a common and formal denominator in inter-Muslim relations. It remains to be seen how the positionings developed in the Netherlands and in Austria are adapted to those that have emerged in Germany.

Notes

1. Both plans have been developed exclusively by experts who can thus speak of female expertise in this context.
5. Ibid.: 39.
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