

Production of Knowledge

KRISZTINA KEHL-BODROGI

# Alevi in Germany On the Way to Public Recognition?

In the past decade, Alevi in Germany have stressed their distinctness mainly in terms of culture when negotiating with the majority society. Since recently, however, an increased emphasis on religion can be observed, which is not so much due to a regained strength of religiosity. It is rather a response to changed public discourses and an adjustment to the prevailing legal and institutional conditions. In Germany, the issue of immigration has been treated in terms of cultural difference since long ago, the religious identity of the mainly Muslim immigrants having nearly no impact on integration policy. Yet since the end of the 1990s, when attention was drawn to fundamentalist tendencies among the Muslim youth, the religious dimension of immigration has been brought to the fore.

Public debates on the implications of the Islamic presence in Germany 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 Alevi reacted promptly 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 Sunnism and Alevism.

In this reasoning, Alevism clearly appears as an Islamic denomination. Considering the unsettled debates in the Alevi diaspora over such a classification, as well as the rather secular attitude of the majority of its members, the unanimous Alevi support of

the demand for religious instruction may appear surprising.

Indeed, the generating spirit behind the current mobilization appears to be the desire for the recognition of their collective identity, stigmatized under the Ottomans and officially denied in the Turkish Republic. Of equal importance is the will to delimitate themselves from, and to not be placed at a disadvantage with respect to, their Sunni co-immigrants. An observation recently made during a podium discussion organized by an Alevi association in Duisburg may illustrate the prevailing attitude: While the opinion that religion should be kept out of school was met with great approval, all those present stressed that if Sunnis are granted the right to religious instruction, the Alevi should strive for it as well. Furthermore, recognition of the Alevi community in Germany could also have an impact within Turkey. As one of the diaspora cadres put it: 'Our most urgent duty is to fight for legalization. Alevi religious instruction is a first step. If we succeed, Turkey can not continue to deny our distinctness.' Yet the new emphasis on religion is not merely strategic; it refers to inter-community developments as well.

## Alevism in the diaspora

Though since the 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 lack of community-based organizations reflected the decline of Alevism as a result of migration to the urban centres of Turkey – and subsequently to the West. The decline was also accelerated by a state policy unfavourable to the maintenance of heterodox traditions. The outcome has been a nearly complete breakdown of the social-religious structures and a halt to the transmission of the esoteric teachings from one generation to the next. Highly influenced by Marxism, the generation of the 1960s rejected religion, the guardians of which, the Holy Men, thus lost their function and authority.

The rediscovery of Alevi identity began in the mid-1980s as a result of the worldwide decline of the Left and the emergence of Islamism, which aggravated the historical Sunni-Alevi tensions in Turkey as well as abroad. The foundation of the first community-based association in 1989 in Hamburg was the prelude to Alevi organizations all over Turkey and Europe, which have become the backbone of an ethno-political movement striving for public recognition. Today, in Germany alone there are some 150 associations, the majority being combined in the AABF. Only a few of the associations show a clear religious orientation, most having preserved their indifference towards religion. Among the latter, the predominant view is that of Alevism as a 'culture', based on democracy, humanism, and equality of men and women. The term 'culture' is understood here as being in opposition to religion, which is associated with backwardness and fundamentalism, and particularly with orthodox Islam.

In the diaspora, there is a strong tendency to situate Alevism outside of Islam and even to underestimate 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 esteem for Man' and 'gender equality' ranking foremost. Religious issues such as the image of the Deity or rituals came far behind. The inferior role of religion corresponds with the lack of religious education in the associations, with the consequence that the youth is highly ignorant of the traditional belief system. Yet the Alevi increasingly recognize that religion – as the smallest common denominator – is the only bracket with which the community can be kept together. Lacking knowledge of the 'path', it is feared, the youth could experience a loss of identity as they find it difficult to maintain distinctness in a secular society in which they define themselves merely in terms of the Enlightenment. Regarding the lack of transmission of knowledge within the community, it is hoped that religious instruction at school will fill the gap left behind by the breakdown of 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 Holy Lineages and passed on to the disciples in special ceremonies held a few times per year. Due to the orality and the often divergent traditions held by the Holy Lineages, it is difficult to speak of a single and coherent system of beliefs in Alevism. Yet this is exactly what is required today. In order to gain recognition as a religious community, the Alevi have to furnish proof of a binding religious authority, and a consensus in dogma and belief. So as to succeed in the current negotiations over religious instruction, a syllabus has to be presented: A first draft, prepared by the Commission for Religious Instruction of the AABF, was declared inadequate by the authorities and was given back for further specifications. Despite setbacks, the production of a basic textbook of Alevism is breaking new ground. Until now there has not been any conscious and organized effort to systematize and unify the diverse traditions of the community. Diasporic Alevism is thus putting itself under pressure to develop a teachable religion in order to meet the legal requirements.

One of the problems to be solved refers to that of authority. The AABF Commission consists of secular-oriented former leftists, all but one belonging to the 'laity'. As it can be concluded from the references given in the above-mentioned syllabus, they tend to depend on works written by Western scholars on Alevism, rather than on personal experiences or the knowledge of the Holy Men. The latter, though nowadays increasingly demanding a greater say in the affairs of the associations, are not likely to regain their former influence. They are often seen as old-fashioned, dealing with issues alien to the youth. In addition, the Holy Men have maintained the divergence in their treat-

ment of religious issues. 'Listening to them, we become only more confused', is a frequent complaint. In this situation, members of the highly secularized 'laity' are taking on the job of creating a new Alevi theology. However, due to ideological and political divergences among the associations, reaching a consensus remains a difficult task. Nonetheless, the joint struggle for recognition has already managed to bring together competing organizations: It led to the putting aside of internal debates in order to reach an agreement on outward representation of Alevism as a branch of Islam. An agreement has yet to be reached concerning the contents of this future religious instruction.

In the meantime, a textbook on Alevism has been published in Germany, co-produced by an immigrant teacher and a prominent Alevi writer in Turkey.\* As it circumvents awkward themes such as the deification of Ali or the widespread Alevi denial of the divine nature of the Qur'an, the book presents a picture of Alevism denuded of its most heterodox features. But even then, the book provoked the protest of the Turkish authorities, claiming that it shows Alevi to be of an 'other belief' (than Islam). This intervention pointed to the political dimension of the possible recognition of Alevism in Germany. Kurdish Alevi, on the other hand, criticized the book's strong Turkish nationalist attitude. These debates may be a foretaste of the future clashes over the syllabus to be presented to the German authorities in order to gain formal recognition.

Due to the legal and institutional conditions of the host society – particularly state recognition of religions – the Alevi politics of identity gained a new impetus in Germany. Yet as the requirements for recognition are basically derived from the Christian tradition of Germany, adjustment to them will undoubtedly cause further transformations in Alevism, the results of which are at the moment unforeseeable. Until now Turkey has been the intellectual centre of negotiations over Alevism. Thus not even half a per cent of the hundreds of books written by Alevi on Alevism in the last 15 years is the product of the diaspora. But because the teaching of Alevism at school in Germany is nearly at hand – in Turkey it is still out of sight – the focus could very well be shifted to the diaspora.

## Note

\* Celal Aydemir/Cemal Şener (2000), *Alevilik Dersleri*, Hückelhoven.

Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi is a lecturer at the Department of Comparative Religion, University of Bremen, Germany.

E-mail: Krisztina.Kehl@t-online.de

A first Alevi textbook for children.

