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Self-Positioning and Islamic Instruction in Germany

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Western Europe
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Muslim institutions in Europe harbour growing expert knowledge. One example of this development comprises the syllabi for religious instruction of Muslim children at public schools that have been developed in different European contexts. Among other things, these instruction programmes aim at positioning their clientele vis-à-vis the religious sources, in a particular community and society. The premises on which these positionings are based, as well as their religious-theological justification and legitimation, form the focus of a thesis 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 drafts – as Muslim organizations name their first attempts in the area of syllabus development – the practical experience with religious instruction in Austria and the Netherlands is likely to have impacted the further development and reworking of programmes in those 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 committee¹ at the IPD considers the concept of *geschöpflichkeit* or 'created-ness' to be the common denominator 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 *umma* of Muslims – rather than the concept of created-ness – 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 *umma* as a minority under threat. Orienting the children towards a differently defined *umma*, which functions as

Self-Positioning and Islamic Instruction in Germany

a haven or shelter, is thus the focus of the latter's education programme.²

Different from the approach of the IPD, the notion of God remains abstract in the Zentralrat's proposal to the extent that there is a deliberate avoidance of God as a thematic unit. This absence of theologizing is characteristic of 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 toward an ideal *umma*, and thus its proposal is open only at its margins to the non-Muslim world: regardless of where they live, Muslims remain within this *umma*, 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 presented inside and through the community. The IPD, on the other hand, encourages children to locate themselves within the context of Islam understood as a universal culture, as a natural perspective on the world. It encourages them to feel connected with others in this context, to positively focus on commonalities, and thus to see themselves as part of a plural society rather than as a minority suffering from discrimination.

Religious sources

Analysis of the German Islamic syllabi reveals that it is the attitude toward the sources – the particular perspective on the nature of the texts – that forms the basis for the planning committees' relationship to the world. This basic attitude toward the religious sources determines which elements

the instruction plans consider to be crucial and non-negotiable for Islam and for being Muslim.³

Both programmes place different emphasis on the religious sources. In the conception of the IPD, the entire world is accessed through the Qur'anic text, and the text in turn is illuminated by the concrete lifeworld. As a result of the vital relation between text and life, the meaning of the source, its reach and interpretation dominates the IPD's syllabus. The meanings of the Qur'an develop a force and dynamics that enable a continuous expansion of the definition of Islam as well as an incorporation of plural, contemporary ways of and perspectives on life into the understanding of Islam. The Zentralrat, on the other hand, does not posit an integrated relationship between text and world, since it presents religion predominantly as ritual and ethics, which are extracted from the sources and become 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 canon of fixed rules and bodies of knowledge, the Zentralrat attempts to protect religion as a distinct subsystem and to situate it as a stable element in the lives of children.

The focus on the individual leads planners of the IPD to emphasize individual answers and paths in the sense of *turuq* (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.⁴ 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 relationship to God and reduces the *mu'amalat* from a legal code managing the totality of social life to moral comportment. According to Halstead, 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 the shared path of life.⁵ In turn, the emphasis on the primacy of the individual in the IPD's logic by no means indicates a restriction of religion to one system among others. 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 circumvent it or draw upon single elements that they deem befitting. 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 thus may be 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 respective religious-theological approaches. Both syllabi do not problematize the lack of explicit engagement with the Islamic tradition that characterizes them. Instead, direct access to the sources is implicitly offered 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 assumes the irrelevance of tradition 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 *tawhid*, the 'five 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 differ from those that have emerged in Germany.

Notes

- Both plans have been developed exclusively by women. One can thus speak of female expertise in this context.
- See Stefano Allievi, *Les convertis à l'islam: les nouveaux musulmans d'Europe* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), 293.
- See Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Islam und Politik. Kritik des religiösen Diskurses* (Frankfurt/M: dipa-Verlag, 1996), 29.
- On the differentiation between public and private dimensions of the Islamic philosophy of education, see J. Mark Halstead, 'Towards a Unified View of Islamic Education', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 6, no. 1 (1995): 38.
- Ibid.: 39.

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Learning how to pray with all the senses! Scene from the training sample, 2001.



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