

Production of Knowledge
GERDIEN JONKER

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 force of the country. As immigrants become citizens, the Muslim faith is slowly being institutionalized. In public discourse arguments flare up, exposing a deeply felt contrariety between the Christian and Muslim faiths. On the part of the German general public, Muslim claims to particularity (places for prayer in schools, separation for biology instruction) meet with resistance, as Muslim activity is 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.



PHOTO: HANS JOACHIM MIRSCHER

Cardinal Czerzinski receives different faith communities for tea, Berlin, February 2000.

For Germany's schools religious privatization, as signalled by American scholars, seems to be the only way to make Muslim particularity socially acceptable. Some thirty years ago, Peter Berger observed in America that the pluralization of religion inevitably led to the privatization of all religions.¹ The mechanism behind this societal re-adjustment seemed to be motored by the wish to live together in peace. When speaking about core religious questions in public, 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, 'hot' 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.²

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 former socialist states 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.

Connecting Muslim Knowledge to the German School System

Muslim communities who wish to play a part in public schooling have to adapt to this legal frame. This is accelerated by the way legislation is put into practice. As state money and responsibility is involved, the organizational model and educational content are heavily scrutinized by the court. Judges pose questions to determine whether an organization is really a religious community, whether it is able to cooperate with institutions of the state, and whether the content is genuinely a product of religious tradition (and not a result of political or ideological indoctrination). Particularly the last question shows a bias, one that has prevented Muslim organizations from entering the educational system to this day.

In fact, the intricacies of German jurisdiction on the freedom of religion present only part of the picture, the ongoing process of secularization comprising the other. Between 1965 and 1999 the percentage of churchgoers among the population of the former Bundesrepublik (West Germany) dropped from 75% to less than 30%. And, as the population of socialist Eastern Germany had been discouraged from religion for two entire generations, the total of non-practising Germans duly increased after re-unification. This development decreases the country'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 religiosity a form of ignorance. When Muslim religiosity is at issue, many tend to see it as politics in disguise. Of course, there is a xenophobic component in their distrust of Islam. This is reinforced by representatives of various migrant organizations 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 undercover extremism and indoctrination.³ 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 Sunnite (Hanifi rite) school. Due to a high concentration of immigrants from southeast Anatolia, in Berlin the picture differs. As a rule Kurds follow the Shafi'i rite and approximately 30% of all Kurds and Turks living in this city adhere to the Alevi rite, which is a different brand of Muslim religiosity alto-

gether. In the light of the German legislation, all Muslim communities have remained underdeveloped in terms of religious organization. The law expects religious communities to develop interior differentiation and to form expert groups, this being the only way in which state institutions are able to cooperate on educational designs.

In November 1998, the Berlin court decided upon nominal inclusion of the local Islamic Federation into the school system. The Islamic Federation is a single-purpose organization with the aim of providing the means for collective religiosity. It lays claim to representing all Berlin Muslims. As in other Muslim organizations, individual membership is rather low but the board of the Federation mirrors a wide spectrum of Muslim religiosity in this city. Out of the 71 mosques, 53 – including the Shi'ite and the Kurdish Shafi'i – gave written testimony to the fact that they feel well represented by the Federation. The Alevis of Berlin, however, deny the Federation's claim, as do all the Turkish citizen organizations whose members as a rule do not participate in mosque community life. However, the Islamic Federation does cooperate with the Milli Görüş, a Turkish organization that claims to sustain Muslim life in general and for that purpose has set up youth and women's organizations within the Federation mosques. It also offers sustenance in economic networking and organizes summer schools and religious festivals. Kemalists, Alevis and the general German public demonstrate a strong distrust of the Milli Görüş because of its (former) association with the Islamist parties in Turkey.

As yet, the court decision has not yet been turned into practice. Because of its connections to Milli Görüş, the Federation has not been able to gain access to any of the Berlin schools. Moreover, it is still in the process of preparing teachers and schedules. Nonetheless, the 1998 court decision was an incentive for Muslims all over the country to develop educational plans and for local administrations to develop tools for communication.

Muslim organizations in Berlin, Hessen, Northrhine-Westphalia, Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, all agreeing upon the so-called 'Four plus One' formula (Four Sunni law schools plus one Shi'a) but excluding Alevis and Ahmadiyya, now have produced proposals for educational programmes. Furthermore, administrations of these states organized informal working groups as future instruments for cooperation. In Berlin, proceedings seem to be well under way. Its law on freedom of religion, being 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 Jewish teacher training programmes, 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. Core issues comprise inter-religious co-existence, flexibility in gender issues, individual rights and abstinence from political goals. As the Federation continues to cooperate with Milli Görüş, doubts of its ability to solve these issues slow down procedures.

In this way, a proposal for religious instruction – the outcome of internal religious considerations – is being put to test by educational and religious experts, politicians and administrators who do not necessarily belong to the religious community involved. Of course other candidates, Jews, Mormons, Unitarians, and Humanists, now teaching in state schools were also questioned prior to admission. Questions aim to connect the school teachings of a particular religious tradition to the mainstream of Germany – including its secular tradition, emphasis on individual rights, or gender equality – which in itself comprises abstractions of diverse religious and ideological traditions and tendencies. As a consequence the predominantly Christian and secular members are in the position to define the main goals and methods. And where Muslims are concerned, non-Muslims often demonstrate a high degree of subjectivity.

For the representatives of the Islamic Federation, proceedings in the working group bear the consequence that they are obliged to make adjustments in the educational plan and also in places where their following expects clear religious instruction. To solve this problem, the proposal now sometimes resorts to 'humanist' reasoning. Those responsible now distinguish between what is communicated to the community and what is communicated to 'the outside world', including the public schools. Thus, whenever a topic appears to be very sensitive – different treatment of the sexes, or headscarves – it dissociates from strictly religious arguments and points to the responsibility of the individual believer instead. A shift to the privatization of religion can thus be seen taking its course. In the long run, this shift may well connect Islamic knowledge to the German educational system, and through this to the acceptance of Islam.

Notes

1. Berger, Peter (1969), *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, Garden City NY: Doubleday, p. 153.
2. Hammond, Phillip E. (2000), *The Dynamics of Religious Organisations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 6.
3. The dominant positions are presented in Schreiner, Peter and Wulff, Karen (eds) (2001), *Islamischer Religionsunterricht. Ein Lesebuch*, Münster: Comenius Institut.

Dr Gerdien Jonker, Philipps University, Marburg, Germany.
 E-mail: jonker@mail.uni-marburg.de