The Pros and Cons of Islamic Religious Education in Germany

Theses

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Introductory Remarks

The debate about bringing Islamic religious education to German schools is far from new. As early as the late 1970s, it had become evident that many Muslims who had come as temporary workers were in Germany to stay. This also meant that they would wish to practise their religion in their new home. Up to then, they had been content with improvised prayer rooms and poorly trained imams, but now, plans to build proper mosques took off, and demands for the introduction of Islamic RE for the growing number of Muslim pupils in Germany's schools were voiced. The federal states' education systems were generally receptive to the idea, and in North Rhine-Westfalia – the state with the largest population of Muslims – plans to launch Islamic RE were developed as early as 1979. However, it quickly became clear that there was no institutional partner on the side of the Islamic community able to fill the role that the Basic Law assigns religious communities in the co-responsib ility for religious education in public schools. Clear rules concerning membership were the primary unmet requirement to qualify as a religious community in this sense. So as not to allow the project to lose momentum entirely, several states – including Bavaria, Baden-Wurttemberg and North Rhine-Westfalia – launched more modest model projects to provide a provisional Islamic RE until the matter could be resolved. By now, these projects – many of them quite successful – have taken on a remarkable permanency. After more than a decade, we are no nearer replacing them with 'proper' Islamic RE than we ever were.

The following theses will address the pros and cons of Islamic RE in the light of the empirical results of our research work (Mohr; Kiefer 2009).

1.Thesis: Islamic religious education is a vital instrument to ensure equal status.

Religious Education is a regular curricular subject at public schools in Germany. This status is enshrined in Article 7, Paragraph 3 of the Basic Law, where it is defined explicitly as a regular school subject administered in joint responsibility by the state and the religious communities. Though the exact interpretation differs from state to state, and two of them – Bremen and Berlin – represent exceptions from the rule, regular Protestant and Catholic religious education is provided nationwide from Hanover to Sindelfingen and Cologne, with some cities also offering it to Jewish or Orthodox pupils. Wherever enough children of a given religious community are enrolled at a school, their parents have the legal right to confessional RE. In order to provide this in the constitutionallsy defined manner, though, the state needs an institutional partner to cooperate with. To date, no Muslim organisation has been able to meet the stringent requirements that German constitutional law makes of a properly constituted religious community. That is the reason why Muslim children in Germany for decades have been reduced to attending Christian RE or a secular substitute lesson except where model projects provided unilateral Islamic religious education

provisionally in the absence of a formally constituted religious community to work with. Many school authorities are now offering either a provisional Islamic religious education on a confessional basis or a non-confessional form of Islam Studies in the sole responsibility of the state.

Pros: Observations of this form of Islamic RE show that it is welcomed by Muslim pupils and parents, teachers and non-Muslim pupils as an instrument of creating equality even in its current provisional form. It provides the normality and equal treatment universally desired and provides a place inside German schools for the Islamic tradition. This represents not only formal, legal and institutional recognition, it is felt to be a meaningful personal gesture of acceptance towards neighbours, fellow students and colleagues. The degree to which formal Islamic RE as a school subject is able to create a sense of belonging is illustrated by the statement of parents interviewed in the course of a study on the experimental project in Lower Saxony. They stated that „visiting Islamic religious education (…) can prevent Muslim children from becoming outsiders because Christian children also have Christian religious education". (Uslucan: 56)

Cons: The positive impact outlined above is entirely due to the institutiopnal status accorded Islamic RE within the school system. Neither the actual content or quality of the classes nor the question whether any form of confessional religious education is appropriate for a public school in Germany today are addressed. In practice, the provision of RE in many federal states has changed greatly over the past decades. Affiliation with a religious community is frequently nonexistent or a mere formality, and in many cases it proves impossible to define 'belonging' to a religion with any certainty. Even parents and children who are members of a recognised religious group frequently choose attendance or nonattendance in religious education classes of a specific confession based on factors such as the teacher providing it, the desire to dialogically engage with different world-views, or the choice of close friends rather than automatically opting for 'their' form. The position forwarded in defense of confessional RE that only a solid grounding in one's own tradition allowed an open and respectful attitude towards other beliefs may well need reappraisal in the light of the reality of pluralism in modern life patterns. The „own tradition" is far less likely today to be living faith handed down from parent to child in a family, to be reflected and critically examined in religious education classes. Beliefs are increasingly individual rather than communal and acquired in a process of reflection rather than accepted as part of a traditional lore. Institutionalising an Islamic religious education alongside those of the other established faiths may provide a pragmatic short-term solution to providing equal recognition. The move would place it in the same position as all these forms of confessional RE, though: increasingly on the defensive in the face of mounting questions of legitimacy. It alson poses the question which children are to be considered 'Muslim'. Can children with a migration background from a Muslim country automatically be assumed to share a Muslim religious identity? Should the school contribute to socialising them into one? This equally applies to all other forms of confessional RE in public schools, of course, whether it is for children from Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or Jewish backgrounds. The model in itself is subject to legitimate

questioning both in terms of its educational value and its place in today's society. Its roots, after all, lie in the mid-twentieth century, a time when the nascent Federal Republic was still a biconfessional, majority-Christian country with pervasive religious traditions. Today's society characterised by value pluralism, extensive immigration, and great diversity in life patterns. A model that segregates pupils into confessional groups is a hindrance to dialogue and an obstacle to peaceful coexistence. Despite the legal situation the Basic Law enshrines, shared interreligious learning of the kind that the Hamburg model of *Religion für alle* has exemplified appears to be the more promising approach for an intercultural education that addresses the current reality and represents applicable ethical orientation in an authentic and accessible manner.

2.Thesis: Islamic RE replaces Madrassas.

During the early phase of the debate about Islamic RE in the 1980s and early 1990s, no Muslim voices were part of it. It was mostly the preserve of educators and sociologists, not Muslim migrants and their children. That is why at this stage we often encounter the argument that school-based Islamic religious education could serve to discourage parents from sending their children to an authoritarian, strictly catechetic religious instruction in so-called 'backyard mosques' (*Hinterhofmoscheen*). It was widelyfeared they would be inducted into a dogmatic form of Islam away from from public scrutiny and control, whereas a school-based form of religious education would give them the opportunity to engage with religion openly and in a form compatible with plural society. Finally it was argued that not only would Islam be adapted to modern German society and the institution of the school, the arrangement would also allow the children to concentrate more fully on their educational careers and improve their future chances if they were no longer compelled to divide their time between school and mosque.

Cons: The early expectations were not fulfilled. In many cases, Muslim parents opt for religious instructions in mosques in addition to Islamic RE in school, viewing the two as compatible parts of an Islamic upbringing. The study on Islamic RE in Lower Saxony we referenced above shows that two thirds of parents are giving children religious instruction either at home or in the mosque alongside Islamic RE (Uslucan:30). The reasons quoted are manifold: Many parents are apparently unhappy with the scope and nature of the curricular content offered in school Islamic RE. Eleven percent of the respondents stated that their child had not learned anything new in the lessons, and 42 percent think they learned little (Uslucan: 29). The expectation of 'learning Islam' they express is one of acquiring the knowledge required to practice their religion. They frequently state they want the school to teach more prayer suras and hadith and placing greater emphasis on the distinction between *halal* and *haram*, the permitted and the forbidden (Uslucan: 31). These are the traditional tasks of Islamic education provided in the mosque. As long as the school cannot meet these demands, parents who wish for their children to receive a traditional induction into religious practice and do not feel competent to provide it at home will opt for mosque lessons. However, this idea of dividing tasks between the school and the family and religious community is hardly uncommon in other forms of religious education today. The schools'

main focus traditionally was to provide knowledge in order to allow children to grow while the religious communities would provide values and instruction rather than factual content. This was expressed rather pithily – and untranslatably- as „*Die Schulen erziehen durch Bildung, die Religionsgemeinschaften bilden durch Erziehung*" (Heumann: 79). However, as Heumann shows, this traditional conception is becoming increasingly untenable even in Christian religious education. The more communities and families prove unable to fulfill their traditional educational role, the more the school is focused on as a forum of religious experience. Thus, we are seeing a revival of conceptions of religious education like the traditional form of *Evangelische Unterweisung*, which addressed the pupils as members of the Christian community and integrated prayer, song and Biblical stories into the lessons in more recent approaches whose primary aim is to lead pupils into communication with God (Heumann: 79).

Pro: Recent approaches that view religious education in school as a forum of evangelisation and the induction into religious practice must be understood in the context of the widespread loss of Christian social tradition. Children are increasingly less likely to be introduced into their religious practice or to have religious experiences as an integral part of their life. The assumption for Muslim children, on the other hand, has usually been that they are rooted in a living religious tradition and stand in need of a more reflected view which public school RE can provide. Uslucan's study from Lower Saxony shows that alongside a majority for whom this is largely true, about one quarter of Muslim children did not receive any form of religious socialisation: They were never at a mosque and their parents do not pray (Uslucan: 31). Muslim religious educators have been arguing in favour of an inductive, preaching approach for both groups. The former would be able to connect their religious upbringing with what they learn in school while the latter would receive their induction into religious practice in the RE classroom. If this development – paralleled by a strong current in Christian RE – were to become dominant, Islamic religious education in school may yet turn into full replacement for instruction at the mosque.

3.Thesis: Islamic RE fosters an Islamic identity in a largely non-Muslim environment.

The expectations that Islamic RE meets are manifold, but all stakeholders agree that one of its purposes is to facilitate the creation of an identity. The first curriculum for Islamic RE in Germany, developed in North Rhine-Westfalia in the 1980s, stressed the development of a Muslim or Islamic identity in a predominantly non-Muslim environment as a key task of the subject. The exact same expression is found in its successor of 2007 (MfSW-NRW 2007). Most Muslim parents agree with the position. The study by Uslucan records a strong majority stating they were sending their children to Islamic RE „Because we are Muslims ourselves and want our child to get to know his own religion" (Uslucan: 55). „A further relevant motivation was to acquire knowledge about culture and religion in order to counteract alienation, but also the fact that the parents themselves felt they lacked the time or knowledge to provide this to their children." (Uslucan: 55)

Pros: Any confessional religious education serves to establish an identity by its very nature. Its pupils are grouped into a specific community and instructed in its ways, up to age 14 even by parental fiat, regardless of their own personal wishes and sense of affiliation. Teachers have repeatedly reported children in their classes who are unaware that they are Muslims or what it means to be a Muslim. They only learn to assume this identity for themselves in the course of Islamic RE. Among the generation of their parents, the concern that is predominantly voiced is that the children might lose their religion under the influence of a mainly non-Muslim, Christian or secular civilisation. We find expressions such as that they might become *alienated* from the older generation, they might *forget* Islam, and that they had to *preserve* their Islamic identity. This line of argument reveals two key convictions: 1. that the children already possess a religion they are in danger of losing, and 2. that they need a protected space inside a non-Muslim environment to develop, grow and even live their religious identity. This desire among Muslim parents to see their children's identities strengthened is mirrored and modified in the official curricula. The aim of public schools is specifically to foster a controlled form of Islamic identity that is compatible with modern plural society. The addition "in a non-Muslim environment" that has persisted in the curricula of North Rhine-Westfalia from day one certainly owes less to parental fears of alienation than to the desire of the German state to adapt Islam to its plural and democratic society.

Cons: Aside from the fact that any confessional religious education both presupposes and then reproduces the religious identities it purports to foster, the aim of an Islamic identity as it is formulated for Islamic RE can be criticised on its own terms. It begs the question what the children are supposed to actually learn. Are they to become, as the North Rhine-Westfalian curriculum of 1986 puts it, "good" Muslims? A classroom discussion about what being a good Muslim actually entails would require the topic to be debatable openly, without self-censorship and limitations. Or are they to learn to understand the expectations of society and the older generation? In that case, the experimental Islamic RE in Lower Saxony must be regarded as a resounding success, since more than two thirds of the pupils polled state that it has helped them to better understand their parents (Uslucan: 30f).

4.Thesis: Islamic RE helps Muslim children realise that Muslim does not equal Turkish.

Many young people from a Turkish background tend to conflate the ideas of Islam and Turkishness to the point of espousing the view only Turks can be 'real' Muslims. An Islamic RE would place them side by side with pupils from Arab, Iranian or German backgrounds laying equal claim to an Islamic identity, or they might even be instructed by a teacher of German descent, which challenges their traditional mental habits or at least inhibits their ability to lend ready expression to them. A religious education teacher is less suitable for definition as the 'Other' and far less easy to dismiss and insult as a „German" than a maths or sports teacher would be.

Pros: Islamic RE deomnstrates the universalist character of Islam as a religion with adherents of very different natonal and ethnic backgrounds. Unlike the instruction provided by the – frequently ethnically and linguistically homogenous – mosque communities, school RE includes people from a variety of backgrounds and can thus be effective at creating a degree of intra-religious integration, provided that the curriculum is designed to mirror this plurality. Chauvinist and reductionist interpretations of Islam such as that propagated by part of the Ülkücü-movement (Grey Wolves, see Innenministerium NRW 2004, S.7) can thus be headed off early.

Cons: The impact of a subject with two lessons a week is being greatly overestimated here. Nationalist interpretations of Islam need to be addressed at the root. The indoctrination that many mosques and Turkish associations provide should certainly be accorded closer attention than is currently the case. Spreading a chauvinist flavour of Islam needs to become unacceptable to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. This also extends to the field of curriculum development, where we see considerable room for improvement in terms of reflecting theological and cultural diversity. So far, the representation of Islam in religious education has largely been limited to its Sunni form, and here mostly to the type practiced in Turkey. This limited focus allowed an intrareligious Muslim dialogue in the classroom only by happy coincidence ratherthan making it a cornerstone of the educational concept.

5. Islamic RE offers children a protected space within which they can develop a reflected approach to their own faith safe from criticism and attempts at indoctrination.

Modern conceptions of religious education regard the school as a neutral forum within which students are at liberty to engage with their faith free from dogmatic limitations and taboos.

Pros: Religious instruction in mosques is not always limited to reading the Qur'an and learning ritual practices. Frequently, teachers there impart a rigid morality and a questionable system of ethical judgement defined by the opposing poles of *haram* and *halal*. Religiouseducation in a school context does not dictate morality and allow pupils to freely and critically engage with the corpus of their tradition(s). Its goal is not to inculcate a religiosity that conforms to traditional precepts, but the ability to reflect religious thought critically and independently.

Cons: A modern Islamic educational paradigm that reflects on its tradition and inculcates individual thought as a value is still in its infancy. As yet, it cannot inform school curricula and practice. Currently, Islamic religious education is very much taught on an ad-hoc basis. Teachers often find themselves inadequately supported by theory in their conflicts with mosque communities and parents. Whenever the goals or methods of Islamic RE meet resistance, children are taken out of the class. A school subject on its own cannot replace the overdue reform of an outdated and authoritarian madrassa culture.

6.Thesis: People are only able to practice tolerance and enter into dialogue once they are securely at home in their own religion.

In the debate on religious education, especially teachers have repeatedly stressed that tolerance towards other religions can only become a sutainable attitude once pupils have found their own religious home.

Pros: To many individuals, the modern globalised world above all appears unbearably confusing and invasive. Its political, cultural and economic developments have become so complex that their workings are incomprehensible to laypeople. Faced with this reality, an increasing number of people are now seeking out their social, religious and cultural roots. This quest for self-localisation can thus be understood as an effort to create certainty in a society characterised by plural values. The role of religion is central to this endeavour. It can offer explanations and clear norms that gives people stability and orientation. That makes it an important element of creating and stabilising individual identities and enabling decisionmaking. These are the foundations of dialogue and tolerance. Only someone who knows his own religion can recognise and define differences and commonalities with others and enter into a reasoned dialogue on them with people of other faiths.

Cons:A homogenous social environment is certainly no good school for constructively engaging with people of different beliefs and faiths. It simply offers no opportunities to learn how. Handling diversity can only be practised among people who hold different beliefs. A firm religious conviction, on the other hand, is no precondition for a constructive dialogue. Successful interreligious and intercultural learning takes place every day, inside and outside the school, with and without confessional religious education. Indeed, it needs to be pointed out that 'firm' convictions can become an obstacle to dialogue. A strong certainty that some beliefs are right, and thus others wrong, can create barriers that hinder or prevent a ny dialogical exchanges.

7.Thesis: Islamic religious education fosters democratic attitudes and prevents extremism.

The impact of the mainly negative image of Islam created in the media on the debate about Islamic RE is painfully obvious. Fears of jihadism and political Islamism are evident at every turn. Politicians at both the federal and state level have come to view Islamic religious education as a tool to counter the radicalisation and political instrumentalisation of the Islamic faith (Kiefer 2008, S. 83 – 95).

Pros: In the opinion of teachers, the media habits of many pupils from migration backgrounds are worrying. Through satellite television and the internet, they have ready access to information and entertainment transporting antisemitic and Islamist views. One instance of this are the popular programmes - available in Germany, too – of the Lebanese TV station Al Manar and the Turkish broadcaster TV5 (Kiefer: 83 – 95). Both stations broadcast entertainment programmes in the past years that clearly espouse antisemitic positions. An open debate on these is rare and usually cursory in families and mosques. It was demonstrated in middle school *Islamkunde* lessons in North Rhine-Westfalia that a debate on media coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict can be a source of productive engagement in the classroom. In it, the multiperspectivity of the conflict can be rendered tangible. Through analysing media content, pupils can come to understand that simple patterns of guilty and innocent parties rarely do justice to the complexity of the real political situation on the ground or the perspective of those directly affected. Beyond this, Islamic RE can also counteract radicalising tendencies by thematising the plurality inside living Islam in all topics it addresses. Thus, pupils can see for themselves that absolutising religious truths can lead to grave conflicts. This insight is an important foundation for developing tolerance.

Cons: Islamic religious education in public schools suffers from being overloaded with every kind of expectation. Not only is it supposed to enhance the linguistic abilities of immigrant children, it must also help to integrate pupils and parents and foster the development of an Islam compatible with a plural society. Surely, a subject of two lessons weekly cannot come anywhere near doing justice to these ambitions. Islamic RE is not and cannot be responsible for fixing every problem in society. It is also clear that a government-sponsored school subject cannot be the appropriate instrument with which to modify the religious beliefs of pupils in any way, whether to make them fit a pluralistic society or not. This must be the preserve of the religious communities themselves. For the state to overstep this boundary would constitute a violation of its constitutional obligation to maintain a religiously neutral stance.

8.Thesis: Islamic RE develops German language skills.

Advocates of integration policies view Islamic religious education as an important linguistic and cultural learning tool especially in primary education. They see it as vital that it teaches pupils to debate Islamic questions in a German-speaking environment.

Pros: Most pupils attending Islamic RE come from migration backgrounds and many have a limited or almost or no command of German. By teaching the subject in German, it will contribute towards improving their language skills. It also becomes a place in which religious texts and concepts, individual experiences and memories andfamily traditions are translated into that language. This effort allows the children to feel at home in the German language and enter into a meaningful dialogue with their non-Muslim, German-speaking environment.

Cons: Teaching pupils adequate German cannot be considered a primary purpose of religious education. For one thing, it is wrong to think of Islamic RE as a kind of reservation for the children of foreigners in need of help. Actual classes are usually quite heterogenouis. Many of the pupils were born in Germany and have an excellent command of the language. Indeed, in many cases it is the teachers that require a professional development of their language skills before they can begin to undertake the demanding project of rendering Islamic issues into a new linguistic and cultural context.

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