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Executive Summary

Muslim Children and the 'Right to Religion': The Long Road to Islamic Religious Education in Germany

1. Introduction and Legal Basis

The majority of immigrant children in German schools come from a Muslim background (600,000). To make these children participate in Christian religious education would neither be desirable nor would it concur with the basic tenets of the German constitution, which states in article 7.3: "Religion is a standard teaching subject which must be taught in agreement with the basic rules of the religious communities." Religious education is therefore not a privilege of the Christian churches. As a result of the federal system in Germany, the various Länder all have different pilot projects promoting Islamic religious education in the German language in state schools, in which religious groups and associations are involved in varying ways.

- In Lower Saxony Islamic religious education is offered at 19 educational institutions.
- Baden-Württemberg is planning trial projects at 12 primary schools in

cooperation with local parent associations and mosque committees for the 2006/2007 school year.

- From 2001, schools in North Rhine-Westphalia, Bavaria and Bremen have offered "Islamic Instruction" in German and this now applies to approx. 200 primary schools.
- In Berlin, the Islamic Federation offers its own religious education courses which are attended by more than 4,000 boys and girls.

So far, there is no Islamic religious education in the sense of the "denominational teaching subject" prescribed in the German constitution (like Christian religious education), since there is no representative institutional partner for the education authorities.

It is characteristic in all these trials that instruction is oriented towards the "correlation principle" applied to Christian religious education. In class, the boys and girls are meant to acquire the ability to relate the basics taught by the Qur'an and Sunna to their own life in Germany and to other peoples' "real-life" experiences.

This paper is a summary of the paper "Muslim Children and the 'Right to Religion': The Long Road to Islamic Religious Education" by Friedhelm Kraft, FES-London, May 2005

2. "Islamic religious education" - the pilot project in schools in Lower Saxony

Since 2003/04 a pilot project for "state-authorized religious education" has been proceeding in the German Land of Lower Saxony. This religious education is available in 19 primary schools. Teachers who have acquired additional qualifications in special training courses are teaching the subject in the German language but without awarding marks. When the child's parent or guardian registers the child for the course, this is taken as proof of Islamic religious adherence. The basis for this is laid down in the Ministry of Culture's guidelines, which were worked out at a newly-convened "Round table for Islamic religious education" which included the "Schura Niedersachsen" (Muslim association of Lower Saxony) and the "Türkisch-Islamische Union der Anstalt für Religion" (DITIB - Turkish-Islamic Union of Religious Institutions).

The basic guidelines

The focus of the basic guidelines is the "correlation principle", which aims at linking religious belief with the real-life experience of the schoolchildren. The idea is to avoid a mere spontaneous imitation of traditional forms of faith practice. For this reason, the test project is viewed as highly significant in religious and political terms. The idea is for Islam to be an integral part of the curriculum, in parallel with Christian religious education, both as a topic of discussion and as a means of addressing the children's subjective experience of religion. The guidelines are structured in this way: six articles of faith are nominated in step 1; in step 2 six topics are chosen to form teaching content and then allocated to the four primary school years; in step 3 ten fixed topics are formulated. The guidelines focus on the content and not on the didactic dimension, although they are based on elementary didactic knowledge and experience from Christian religious education. The guidelines neither constitute an inner-Islamic consensus about the aims of the lessons, nor do they represent a consensus between the German state and Muslim communities.

3. "Islamic teaching" in North Rhine-Westphalia

In North Rhine-Westphalia there has been "religious teaching" for Muslim schoolchildren as part of their Turkish-language teaching since the 1980s. Since the 1999/2000 school year that teaching has also been undertaken in the German language according to curricula worked out by the education authorities. This is "religion-based education" under the sole jurisdiction of the state, due to the fact that the Länder governments have no representative Muslim partner who can cooperate on this project in accordance with para. 7.3 of the German constitution pertaining to religious instruction in schools. To date, out of all the suggestions for this instruction, the curriculum work in use in NRW has received most support from the academic Islamic theologians. The reason for its wide acceptance is likely to be the way in which the matter was approached. To start with, the school authorities held meetings with Turkish teachers, scholars of Islam and teachers of religious education to work out curricula; after that, they discussed the results with Islamic theology faculties and the Turkish Office for Religious Matters and the German branch of the Muslim World Congress. When it came to implementing the policy, however, the non-consultation of the local Islamic organisations and clubs did prove to be a problem.

The new draft Islamic Studies curriculum of July 2005

From a formal point of view, the subject of Islamic Studies remains the same, but in practice a purely "neutral", didactic imparting of knowledge about Islam is out of the question. The curriculum content is not derived from traditional sources; instead, facts only become topics for teaching if they can be linked to a didactic question. Three main sources of Islam are offered: the Qur'an, Sunna and the texts of the sources of law. The draft is remarkable for the way it has successfully addressed "thematic elements" from the perspective of "everyday life in Germany" and "basic tenets of Islam" (subdivided into three further groups). It is however not so clear which approaches to Islamic theology and traditional beliefs underlie the individual parts of the curriculum. The Islamic faith emerges as an apparently "objective" fixed force, access to which can

only be decided by a didactic process. The Islamic associations are therefore unlikely to feel at ease with this curriculum.

4. Islamic religious education in Berlin

In contrast to what is stated in the German constitution, in Berlin religious education is a subject for which the churches and religious communities alone have responsibility (according to para. 13 of the Berlin schools law). Children are registered for such classes by their parents and from the age of 14 they can decide for themselves whether they want to continue religious education. Since 2000 courses in the Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Humanist and now Islamic systems of belief have been offered. However, the "Islamic Federation" which is providing the latter courses has been shown to have contacts within the "Milli Görüs Islamic Community" which the *Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution* (Germany's equivalent to the British MI5) has declared an Islamist extremist organisation. It is true to say that the "Islamic Federation" is a highly controversial institution within the Muslim community in Berlin. Voluntary attendance at courses in the German language has now been extended to cover 37 schools. Using its own teachers, the "Islamic Federation" today teaches more than 4,000 children a curriculum which is required to be submitted to the City Senate only to check adherence to the constitution, while the content itself is not monitored.

About the development and concept of the Islamic curriculum

After the idea of working out its own curriculum had failed, the "Islamic Federation" commissioned the "Institute for Interreligious Education and Didactics" (IPD), another organisation which belongs to the Milli Görüs network, to draft a curriculum. The Institute aims to create a link between texts from the Qur'an and the children's lives. The main aim of the curriculum is to focus

on educational goals. What is interesting in this regard is that throughout, Qur'an suras are quoted or reference is made to pertinent sections of the Qur'an. No mention is made of Qur'an didactics, let alone hermeneutics. Since the Federation does not seem to think that an "interpretation" is necessary, the result is that instead of interpretation, "established knowledge" is being taught in the course of imparting the "correct" attitude. Since the Berlin school authorities have no influence on the content of the courses, it remains to be seen what educational and theological standard is achieved in the course and above all what "interpretations" the children ultimately choose to adopt. Teachers are chosen by the Federation and are trained internally and can at most be monitored by the school authorities as to their adherence to the constitution and their educational qualifications.

5. Conclusions

Islamic religious education, which is supposed to be an integrating and identity-promoting exercise, requires a "religious-theological positioning" of the Muslims in Germany. The "Turkish-Islamic Union of Religious Institutions" (DITIB) may play a key role in this cooperation, since it is a foreign organisation with a sole representative claim. The Berlin example is proof that the "power of definition" should not be transferred solely to an Islamic association. The ministries for culture (in the Länder) should take the bull by the horns in developing more transitional solutions. In the long term there is a need to establish guidelines for this type of education based on the constitution. This would apply both to the question of Islamic religious didactics and to university-level training. The overriding characteristic of the entire first generation of guidelines is the concentration on curriculum content, while the question of didactics should play a secondary role.

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Structure of Lower Saxony's Framework Directives

Setting educational outcomes as part of Lower Saxony's Framework Directives

The directives state the following key objectives for Islamic religious studies:

- Looking at existential questions as to where we come from and where are we going and as to the meaning and purpose of human existence;
- In line with the pupils' age, looking at faith, written testimonies, traditions and customs as well as where the faith comes from and its effects in the course of its history;
- Looking at one's own religion.¹

The directives emphasize that:

“(..) Religious Islamic studies (are about) the encounter with and reflection on faith-related experience and faith-related practices; the classroom is not the place for practising one's faith.”²

In contrast, the syllabus drawn up by Central Muslim Council of Germany aims at instruction in faith. The study area “the Koran”, for example, states the following aim: “The effects of the language of the Koran on people's emotions and their sub-conscience shall be used and promoted by using recitations from the original text in Arabic.”³

Instead of aiming at instruction Lower Saxony's directives aim at reflection: “In order to illustrate the effect of the language of the Koran on people's emotions and on community structures excerpts from the original text in Arabic may be used by way of example.”⁴

In addition, those responsible for setting the curriculum in Lower Saxony inserted a “negative outcome”. It states explicitly what must be avoided: “It shall be ruled out that traditional forms of practising the faith be blindly taken on or imitated without reflection and that oral or written traditions be looked at without questioning.”⁵

As a method and a didactic principle to overcome such *blind acceptance of faith and imitation without reflection* the framework directives state a correlation according to which “faith and the practice of faith should be linked to the realities of life as pupils experience them so that both aspects may be explained and developed in that correlation”⁶. This critical and productive correlation between religious traditions and the experience of people of today shall ensure that children are in a position to question traditional attitudes (including those of their parents).

The three systematic approaches of the framework plan

1. Systematic approach

The formulation of study areas is based on what is defined as the core of Islam, the *important statements of Muslim Faith*: the 6 *articles of faith* and their so-called *visible expression*, the 5 *pillars of Islam*. The 6 articles of faith are: the belief in the One God (*Allah*); the belief in His Angels; the belief in His Books, the belief in His Prophets and Messengers (including Mohammed), the belief in Judgement Day (and life after death) and the belief

¹ see *ibid.*, p. 4 *ff.*

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³ Central Muslim Council of Germany (editor): Syllabus for Islamic religious tuition (primary schools), p.5.

⁴ Lower Saxony's Ministry for Education (editor): Framework directives for the educational model “Islamic religious tuition”, p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶ Lower Saxony's Ministry for Education (editor): Framework directives for the educational model “Islamic religious tuition”, p.4.

in God's Divine Decree. The 5 pillars are: witnessing (*Shahadah*), prayer (*Salat*), fasting (*Sawm*), charity (*Zakah*) and pilgrimage (*Hajj*).

The framework directives base their definition of Islam on these six articles and 5 pillars (6+5).

2. Systematic approach

Here the following 6 topics are introduced:

- My community and I
- Islamic ethics
- Stories of the prophets
- The prophet Mohammed
- The Koran
- Principles of Islam⁷

These six topics are in turn subdivided into various sub-topics which are assigned to the 4 years of primary schooling by using table. The second systematic approach is aimed at fleshing out the first one: "The important statements of faith as well as their visible expressions and interpretations will be dealt with in the following six topics."⁸

The study areas of the 6+5 are, however, are only resumed under the 6th topic: *Principles of Islam*. This in fact means that the first and the second systematic approach only come together in the overlap of issues as part of the 6th topic.

3. Systematic approach:

As part of a third approach the directives state 10 so-called compulsory themes. They are fleshed out in the main part of the document which is 36 pages long and are covered in pages 12 to 33. The following compulsory themes are dealt with in two pages each:

Allah
Allah's creation
The Koran
The prophet Mohammed
The prophets
Prayer
Fasting
Living together in the larger community
The Community of Muslims
Encounter with other religions

⁷ Ibid., p. 6 ff.

⁸ Ibid., p. 5.