Islam finds a place in Germany's classrooms

by Isabelle de Pommereau

April 23, 2015

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) Timur Kumlu had just read 20-odd second-graders a chapter from the Qur'an, about Abraham looking for Allah, but finding him neither in the sun, the wind, nor the moon.

Who is Abraham? One boy with piercing dark eyes jumped in. "He trusted Allah!"

Good, and who is Allah? "God," answered a pale-faced Albanian boy. Almost half the pupils at the Henri Dunant school are Muslim, their parents coming from as far as Afghanistan and Iraq, Syria and Albania, Turkey and Morocco.

Kumlu nodded. Allah, he said, is also the god of the Jews and Christians.

"All of us have common roots," he said. "Jews, Christians, Muslims."

Germany, like the rest of Europe, tries to engage with its growing Muslim community and weed out Islamic radicalism, but it is doing it in a unique way. In a country where religious groups and the state have always shared deep symbiotic relationships, the government in recent years has taken drastic steps to put Islam on the same legal footing as Christianity and Judaism. The faith is being incorporated into public school lesson plans and university disciplines. The approach is extending constitutional rights and protections, hitherto granted to mainstream Judeo-Christian groups only, to Islam.

"Most of the kids here live in two cultures and they don't know where they belong," said Kumlu, who has been going through new, state-certified training to teach Islam. "By giving kids a basis on their religion, we can help them not to fall prey to radical discourse."

Constitutional protections for Islam

In many countries, bringing God into the classroom is taboo. England has a state church. France sees religion as a threat to the republic’s sacrosanct laïcité, and keeps it out of public institutions.

But the German state sees religions as partners to help citizens—and democracy—remain stable, and it supports religious groups in myriad ways, notably by levying a church tax on behalf of its most established denominations.

“There is an openness toward religions, not only religions as having their own merits, but as contributing to the well-being of society,” said Mathias Rohe, head of the Center for Islam and the Law in Europe at the University of Erlangen.

It was in response to the abuses of the Third Reich that legal experts anchored religious instruction into Germany's constitutional Basic Law.

But that long applied only to Christians and Jews. German society and lawmakers assumed that Muslim guest workers, brought in as temporary workers from Turkey and other countries, would eventually return home. But Muslims stayed, and their numbers grew: some 4 million Muslims live in Germany, making Islam the country’s fastest-growing religion. Also growing is their desire for the public recognition and constitutional rights that the Judeo-Christian faiths have.

It was Wolfgang Schaüble, while interior minister in Angela Merkel's administration, who first called for Islam to be taught in schools after declaring publicly for the first time that “Islam is part of Germany” in 2005.

Five years later the German Council of Science and Humanities, an advisory body to the government, recommended that Islam find its way in universities, too, so that imams and teachers of Islam could be trained in Germany and in the German language, just as Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish theologians are. Most of the imams at Germany’s roughly 2,800 mosques are imported from Turkey.

A €20 million government initiative led to the creation of today's four Islam theology centers at some of Germany’s most respected public universities, making Germany ahead of most Western countries in incorporating Islam as an academic discipline, experts say. “Being part and parcel of a world-famous university” means that “Islam no longer stands on the outside,” said Omar Hamdan, the Palestinian-Israeli who heads the Islam center at Tübingen University. Similar centers also exist at the universities of Osnabrück, Nürnberg, and Frankfurt. “We stand on equal footing with

the other theology schools.”

Countering extremism

The Islam theology center in Tübingen has some 100 students, Frankfurt’s some 500 students. The graduates are expected to work in local mosques or as social workers, many more as public school teachers.

While the size and nature of the market for program graduates remains to be seen, experts say that promoting a homegrown form of Islam, with scholars and Islam teachers educated at state-accredited programs is one crucial way to counter radical Islam. And with only 4 percent of the country’s estimated 700,000 Muslim pupils receiving religious instruction, Germany will, in coming years, need thousands of new Islam instruction programs and teachers.

“A sound knowledge of Islamic theology and philosophy and psychology, and strategies of discourse and discussion,” is the best antidote there is to extremism, said Harry Harun Behr of Frankfurt University, who’s responsible for the training of future teachers of Islam in middle and high schools in Hessen.

German officials are alarmed by the way young, charismatic, German-speaking radical preachers with little religious background manage to lure young people into jihadism.

“When radical preachers appear somewhere on the market place, my students go there and will argue with these people, mingle with the crowd and discuss their arguments against radical Islam,” Behr said. “We don't want men like them taking the Qur’an out of our hands."

“We are on the brink of having young Islam scholars ready to get their doctoral theses and be anchors in the public to answer the tricky questions of Islam and what is all about,” Behr said. Key, he said, is for students to learn how to think critically about the Qur’an and Islam. “I teach my future teachers to be radicals, too—in their adherence to freedom, to uncompromising attitudes against religiosity, rigid world view and gender-based hostility.”

Street worker Hakan Celik said that is crucial in dealing with Muslim youth. With an Islam theology degree from Frankfurt University, Celik now assists the imam at his local mosque, and works in a de-radicalization program.

“How can Turkish-speaking imams show the Muslims who live here how to live?” said Celik, who once wanted to study in Egypt or Saudi Arabia. “We have to give those kids religion in the German language so they can have a platform to talk about their problems. If we don’t offer it to them somebody else will.”

'Everybody has to behave reasonably'

Fitting Islam into Germany’s complicated legal church-state relationships framework remains difficult. Germany’s myriad Muslim groups espouse a variety of interpretations of and approaches to Islam, making it difficult for state government to find suitable Muslim groups to negotiate school curricula and professorships with. Some groups are considered too radical or too close to the Turkish government to meet German constitutional requirements. And without cooperation from the public, state efforts to adopt Islam can become controversial, as Austria's have been.

It took five years for the German state of Hessen to find Muslim associations in the community to partner with and establish Islam classes for its students. And in some parts of Germany with no Muslims—in the former East, for example—Islam lessons aren’t offered in schools.

The state of Lower Saxony and the city-states of Hamburg and Bremen have gone furthest in affording Islam the same protections and rights as other religions. Each has signed agreements with select Muslim groups that regulate everything from how Islam is taught in schools, to what days Muslims are entitled to take off, to the rights of Muslims to minister in prisons, hospitals, and other public institutions.

The agreements represent “clear-cut rules between the state and religious communities that say, yes, Muslims have those rights, we do support them, we have to implement them,” Rohe said. “They make it easier for lawmakers to take steps the public could view as too 'pro-Muslim. . . . Psychologically, it has a huge impact.”

It remains unclear how “authentic” the state-taught Islam will be seen by the broader Muslim community. The more orthodox will likely view it as watered down. But its proponents say that at least Germany is dealing with Islam out in the open. In France, with its strict separation of church and state, “a lot is happening in dark fields that nobody has control over,” said Michael Kiefer, an Islamic theologian at the University of Osnabrück.

“In Germany, religious organizations have to cooperate with the state, and that cooperation comes with obligation and regulations," he said. “That has a moderating impact: Everybody has to behave reasonably.”