Germany’s classrooms make a place for Islam

by Isabelle de Pommereau in the September 16, 2015 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) Timur Kumlu had just read the 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 school in Frankfurt are Muslim, their parents coming from 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 radicalism, but it is doing it in a unique way. The government in recent years has taken steps to put Islam on the same legal footing as Christianity and Judaism by extending constitutional protections. The faith is being incorporated into public school lesson plans and university disciplines.

“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.”

The German state sees religions as partners in keeping democracy stable, and it supports religious groups in multiple ways.

“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.

Legal experts anchored religious instruction in Germany’s constitutional Basic Law in a response to the abuses of the Third Reich. But for a long time that applied only to

Christians and Jews. German lawmakers assumed that Muslim guest workers, brought in from Turkey and other countries, would eventually return home. But they stayed, and their numbers grew: some 4 million Muslims live in Germany, making Islam the country's fastest-growing religion.

Wolfgang Schaüble, while interior minister in Angela Merkel's administration, first called for Islam to be taught in schools after declaring publicly that "Islam is part of Germany" in 2005. Later the German Council of Science and Humanities, an advisory body to the government, recommended that Islam be part of universities, too, so that imams and teachers of Islam could be trained in the German language as Christian and Jewish theologians are. Most of the imams at Germany's roughly 2,800 mosques are from Turkey.

A 20 million euro government initiative led to the creation of four Islam theology centers at some of Germany's public universities. "Being part and parcel of a world-famous university" means that "Islam no longer stands on the outside," said Omar Hamdan, 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."

The centers' graduates are expected to work in local mosques or as social workers, with many more as public school teachers. So far only 4 percent of the country's estimated 700,000 Muslim pupils receive religious instruction.

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

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

The key, he said, is for students to learn how to think critically about the Qur'an and Islam.

"We are on the brink of having young Islam scholars ready to get their doctoral [degrees] and be anchors in the public to answer the tricky questions of Islam," Behr said.

With an Islam theology degree from Frankfurt University, Hakan Celik now assists the imam at his local mosque and works in a deradicalization program.

“How can Turkish-speaking imams show the Muslims who live here how to live?” asked 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.”

In parts of Germany with fewer or no Muslims—in the former East, for example—Islam lessons aren’t offered in schools. In contrast, the state of Lower Saxony and the city-states of Hamburg and Bremen have signed agreements with Muslim groups that regulate how Islam is taught in schools and which days Muslims are entitled to take off, as well as the rights of Muslims to minister in prisons, hospitals, and other public institutions.

It remains unclear how state-taught Islam will be seen by the broader Muslim community. But some say that at least Germany is dealing with Islam out in the open. In France, with its strict separation of religion 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. . . . That has a moderating impact.” —*The Christian Science Monitor*