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A Pluralistic Account of Religious Upbringing in Islamic Religious Education: Fundamentals and Perspectives

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The ability to deal with the plural relationship in Europe and to rethink the position of other religions in Islamic theology is a particular challenge for Islamic religious education.

In view of the daily life realities of Muslims in Europe, Muslim children and adolescents often have the experience that everything could be different or that their tradition is not the only option for shaping their lives. The differences that distinguish home, community, and school become more and more obvious, so that traditional norms do not coincide with the reality in the schools.

Although these experiences make offering religious and cultural orientation and guidance to Muslim children and adolescents difficult, religious education cannot refrain from educating children and adolescents to become sufficiently pluralistic that they are empowered in their faith and religious practice.

This article attempts to highlight the fundamentals of a religious education that can enable Muslim children to acquire a pluralistic religious upbringing and the specific task of religious education in that process.

Introduction

When speaking about plurality today it is impossible to avoid mentioning religion. How much religion a society needs, or should allow, is one of the central themes of current debates that, above all due to the currently expanding migration of Muslim people, has moved to the center of political discussions.

Muslims, throughout their history, have developed diverse conceptions of how they should live together with representatives of other religions or of what position different religions should have in predominantly Muslim countries. The rights and obligations of the Jews and Christians have been discussed in great detail in the most diverse theological works. In all of these works, the attention is exclusively on how religious minorities should be handled, without the articulation of a single thought concerning their participation in the wielding of power (Karaman 2014). Thus, Islamic theology considers the position of religions in theological thinking exclusively from two perspectives, namely the perspective of victims in historical Mecca, where Muslims were oppressed, and perspectives of Medina, where Muslims were in power.

From a religious educational viewpoint, a change of perspective is necessary, namely to see one's own position in society from a foreign or outsider point of view. It should

not only be about understanding or respecting other religions, but also about self-reflection and self-criticism with regard to one's own tradition in order to meet the current challenges. At present, too little effort focuses on how religions can tolerate each other, rather than on how a plurality of religions could be shaped, so that peaceful coexistence that is devoid of the absolute claim of a particular religion or belief and that is without loss of identity is guaranteed.

Conceiving religion differently: What is the core of the Islamic religion?

At the center of religious education is the religion that actually sets the standards for dealing with society, so that the members of that religion can shape their interactions according to it. This necessitates reconsideration of the definition of the term from Muslim perspectives under new social conditions, such that the pupils can justify their behavior based on their values.

Dīn (religion)¹ as a concept is described in the Qur'an more than ninety times in four dimensions. In the first dimension, *dīn* is described in relation to the lived context, such that *dīn* in this case defines the traditions and customs of a culture and society.² Apart from this contextual reference, the term is understood to comprise the sustainability of a society, because it encompasses the orientation not only of a society, but also of a person.³ *Dīn* also embraces a human's reference to God, in that, through that term, the human can give expression to his relationship to and trust in God.⁴ Within society, in addition to the meanings elucidated above, the term can describe social and legal relationships.⁵

From these portrayals it is possible to infer that the term *dīn* cannot be claimed to signify Islam as it was institutionalized and proclaimed by Prophet Muhammad as a religion, since the *ayah* from the Qur'an, "Unto you, your moral law, and unto me, mine,"⁶ is to be understood such that the Qur'an also refers to the way of life and moral attitudes of non-Muslims in Mecca as *dīn*. Thus, in the teaching of the Qur'an, people's different ways of life with or without reference to God are called religion (*dīn*).

VERILY, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians—all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds—shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.⁷

As in the example of this *ayah* (verse), the Qur'an avoids emphasis on individual religions and instead refers to the personal action and responsibility of the individual. It is not the tribal or group affiliation that is central to the quality of a person, but instead

¹For more details see: Esack (1997, 128) and Asad (1980, footnote 249).

²Qur'an: 7:51.

³Qur'an: 6:161.

⁴Qur'an: 30:30.

⁵Qur'an: 10:105.

⁶Qur'an: 109:6.

⁷Ṭabāṭabāyī comments on this *ayah* as follows: "The verse says that Allah gives no importance to names like believers, the Jews, the Christian or the Sabaeans. One cannot get a reward from Allah, nor can he be saved from punishment, merely by giving oneself good titles, for example, the claim: no one will enter the Garden except he who was a Jew or Christian (2:111)" (1983, 62).

individual works are crucial, regardless of religious affiliation. To understand Islam alone with its institutionalized structures as *dīn* would not correspond to its essence.

In essence, what the Qur'an calls *dīn* is a state of consciousness that corresponds to the natural disposition of humans. This natural predisposition has remained unchanged throughout human history.

Following this brief explanation of the term *dīn*, we can now turn to the term "Islam."

What does being Muslim mean?

The fact that the term "Islam" is attributed to a particular religion and the term "Muslim" to its adherents is apparent not from the Qur'an, but rather from the theological history of Islam. The Qur'an defines these terms as godly devotion and those people who are conscious of God, respectively. According to the Qur'an, godly devotion is not understood as blind obedience, but rather as a responsible God-human relationship. Evidence can be found in the example of Abraham who does not view responsible religious affiliation, or meticulous obedience, as godly devotion.

Abraham was neither a "Jew" nor a "Christian," but was one who turned away from all that is false, having surrendered himself unto God; and he was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him.⁸

The term "Muslim" is used in the Qur'an, along with Ibrahim, for the sons of Yaqub⁹ and the apostles of Jesus. The Qur'an even relates about the Pharaoh when he was close to drowning, that he described himself as being among those who are "Muslims" (... Wa-ana mina l-Muslimin).¹⁰

From this, it is apparent that the theological definitions of "Islam" and "Muslim" do not match the Qur'anic descriptions of these two concepts. In the first attempt, the institutionalization of religion is of immediate importance, whereas in the Qur'an the promotion of religious God-consciousness as a universal identifying characteristic of godly devotion is the primary focus of attention.¹¹ In this regard, the two terms "Islam" and "Muslim" acquire new meaning. They are understood not only in terms of a specific institutionalized religion (*sharī'ah*—Islam) and its adherents, but also in relation to the foundation of faith for all people who believe in God.¹²

⁸Qur'an: 3:67.

⁹Qur'an: 2:133.

¹⁰Qur'an: 10:90: "I have come to believe that there is no deity save Him in whom the children of Israel believe, and I am of those who surrender themselves unto Him!"

¹¹Muhammad Asad (1980, 95) comments on the *ayah*: "For, behold, it is the God-conscious [alone] whom gardens of bliss await with their Sustainer: or should We, perchance, treat those who surrender themselves unto Us as [We would treat] those who remain lost in sin?" (Qur'an: 68:34–35), in which the term "Muslim" is used for the first time in the history of the Qur'an, as follows: "This is the earliest occurrence of the term muslimun (sing. muslim) in the history of Qur'anic revelation. Throughout this work, I have translated the terms muslim and islam in accordance with their original connotations, namely, "one who surrenders [or "has surrendered"] himself to God", and "man's self-surrender to God"; the same holds good of all forms of the verb aslama occurring in the Qur'an. It should be borne in mind that the "institutionalized" use of these terms—that is, their exclusive application to the followers of the Prophet Muhammad—represents a definitely post-Qur'anic development and, hence, must be avoided in a translation of the Qur'an."

¹²Qur'an: 3:19: "Behold, the only [true] religion in the sight of God is [man's] self-surrender unto Him"; or Qur'an: 3:85: "For, if one goes in search of a religion other than self-surrender unto God, it will never be accepted from him, and in the life to come he shall be among the lost."

In the Qur'an, generalized reference to humans without individual characteristics is explicitly avoided, precisely because Islam was intended to liberate people from commitment to a group or clan affiliation.

Plurality as a societal concept of Islam

In light of these principles, the justification for plurality in the Qur'an is not only possible but necessary. As can be seen from the Constitution of Medina, the Prophetic implementation of the Qur'an did not designate those of other faiths as "the others," but instead as being part of, or belonging to, his community (*ummah*). "They are one community (*umma*) to the exclusion of all men" (Guillaume 1955, 231–233).

This inclusion did not bind the heterodox to obedience to the Islamic way of life, but instead assured them of their right to a way of life keeping with their own morality (moral laws). The Prophet Muhammed saw himself as the guardian not only of Islamic morality (law) but also of Jewish and Christian morality.¹³

Furthermore, another *ayah* (verse) from the Qur'an, which formed the basis of the Prophet's actions, reaffirms the social responsibility of Muslims to promote the presence of religions in public, so that this religious diversity, understood as the will of God, remains visible:

"If God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, [all] monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques—in [all of] which God's name is abundantly extolled—would surely have been destroyed [ere now]."¹⁴

The fact that in the theological history of Islam, those of other faiths were treated as members of an inferior religion with special laws, is to be regarded as a deviation from the Qur'anic tradition, or as referring to a specific event without any contemporary significance.

Plurality as a religious educational task

An upbringing that also enables Muslim children to develop a capacity for pluralism includes opportunities, but also conflicts and risks, inasmuch as pupils may feel insecure and confused by this variety of possibilities and consider their faith meaningless and non-binding. In spite of this risk, Islamic education has no alternatives other than to confront the learners with this plurality (Muszkat-Barkan and Marmur 2014, 128).

This is due to the fact, after all, that pluralistic thinking is an indication of mental maturity and self-reflection, and thus also social progress, as it aims at personal human responsibility. This process is about a plural hermeneutic and didactic, which makes it possible to understand or allow the diversity of truths from one's own cultural and religious background.

In this sense, according to Nasr (1989), truth is absolute and irrefutable, but the plurality of form and language in which truth is revealed can be very different and have contradictions. The words with which the truth is to be brought closer to humankind

¹³For more details see: al-Wāhidī, Alī ibn Ahmad (2008, 69).

¹⁴Qur'an: 22:40.

have to be based on their respective cultural normative systems, and this is the reason why there is no unification, but instead a diversity of truths (Nasr 1989, 250–54).

This type of controversial presentation, as stated, has some potential for conflict, but it can help Muslim pupils develop a sensitivity to inner-Islamic and interreligious discourse.

After this presentation of the subject of Islamic pluralistic education, it is necessary to ask how the learners can handle it.

The quest for an individual and dynamic Islamic identity

The introduction to (inner-Islamic) plurality inevitably leads to some uncertainty and confusion among pupils. However, it should not be concluded that this is the case because the learners are passive consumers who randomly choose something out of this diversity. In that case, there would be a risk that religions or cultures would be reduced to a market product, to one of many offerings in the spiritual supermarket, which would certainly be detrimental to the nature of religions, which consider themselves traditional and ethical sources for human action. Promoting the nonbinding as a result of misunderstood pluralism cannot be the goal.

The fact that learners are confronted with and challenged by plurality in order to form their own opinions is the focus of pluralistic education. This educational process is about learning that plurality is not a mere given but part of the personality that challenges one to make self-critical and socially critical decisions and justifications for those choices. Here, pupils have the opportunity to be released from mental prisons. Thus, pluralistic Islamic education is also understood as a contribution to personality development, conscience training, and encounter with the many uncertainties that everyday life may offer.

From the Prophetic education, we know that internal contradictions can give rise to those capacities that enable us to deal with socially complex issues and to make individual decisions and to develop empathy and tolerance in the context of competing truths.

With this ability, as already indicated, a pluralist differs from a relativist as he or she views criticism as an instrument on the way to truth. This criticism spares neither the learners themselves nor the tradition in which they grow up and from which they derive their intellectual resources or conditions. Out of their own situations and preferences, pupils ultimately make decisions for their own lives.

It is also possible for pupils to make new decisions along the way. Looking at the world again and again from other perspectives should also be viewed as a human quality or a sign of maturity. For, without these capabilities, plurality would be a buzzword, an empty avowal to which no action corresponds. Plurality requires people who are capable of dealing with it, otherwise it results in relativism or extremism.

The question raised at the outset, namely how an individual and dynamic Islamic identity can emerge, must be answered in such a way that a healthy and balanced identity can only emerge from a serious examination of one's own tradition, one's own environment and oneself.

Islamic religious education offers the appropriate atmosphere in which the learners not only deal with the corresponding or congruent but also competing ideological

understandings of Islam and, based on this, seek orientation and guidance. These types of inner-pluralism and diversity in society cannot always be regarded as a harmonious mosaic.

Context of the learners

The two fundamentals presented here concern individuals who are trying to find their own way. In contemporary Islam, individuals cannot be thought of as independent beings, regardless of their familial, social, and existing community affiliations in Europe. How does one stand as an individual in my community and how does one reflect on one's own community? Where are the interfaces between pluralism and community, and how does a community define its relationship to plurality? These are basic questions that need to be clarified.

In our case—in Europe, Austria, or Germany—community membership plays a greater role for the pupils who attend Islamic religious education than in Islamic countries. Here the specification that one is Muslim is always supplemented by the indication of the group affiliation.

This includes the very private attitude in the family, where plurality is lived and practiced. This goal of education for community enables the transition from cognitive to normative learning in society. All theoretical skills are tested in practice for their feasibility. By this I would like to say that plurality can hardly be experienced without this community belonging—it is here that one learns to assert oneself in encounters as an individual, and only here can one also learn whether the community is willing to support the values and attitudes that the individual has adopted, or whether he or she can deal with certain tensions in the community.

This is certainly not an easy task for the pluralists in the community, because, especially in Europe, many communities only define themselves through their borders. Islamic religious education is a place where many voices can be heard. And if these many voices are more often felt to be unbearable, they should not be perceived as a disruption of the instruction, or even relativized, because only in such an atmosphere can pluralistic learning arise (Muszkat-Barkan and Marmur 2014, 129).

This plurality in group affiliation, which is still growing, can put pressure on Islamic religious education—in terms of how to maintain balance between individuality and group affiliation. Furthermore, pluralistic Islamic education can create existential fears, to such an extent that learners perceive their affiliation as endangered. It is up to the teacher to decide whether to try to preserve the old order or to undertake such a journey together with the learners.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, an all-encompassing Muslim understanding of religion (*d̄īn*) and of the Qur'an emerges that judges people in accordance, not with their religious and ideological rituals, but rather with their effective actions, which form the ethical foundation of society. The outward differences among religions are to be not only tolerated but also protected as a sign of God. In order to legitimize violence in the name of

God, the content of the Qur'an, which promotes plurality, was unfortunately repeatedly ignored by the various theological schools of thought, or even more regrettably overridden by fictional theories. Muslims living in the West are now faced with the challenge of reforming their understanding of the Qur'an and other Islamic sources, in keeping with the Qur'an's message, and of employing the contributions of these texts to facilitate the successful development of an all-inclusive and thriving plurality.

In this process of rethinking, Islamic religious education has the special task of challenging theology from the perspective of the lifeworld of children in order to confront questions in ways that Islamic theology is not familiar with from its own history and tradition. It is about how the children are empowered to a dynamic identity, how they reflect their own tradition of which they are part in the diversity of cultures and religions, and are able to justify their own positions.

Islamic theology cannot simply presuppose its own norms and values as the sole source for the interpretation of the children's lifeworld, but instead it must open itself up to new social questions from the perspective of its own identity.

Notes on contributor

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