ISLAM IN TEXTBOOKS: NEGOTIATING ITS CORE, ITS DIVERSITY AND WHO BELONGS TO IT

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In today’s discourse, “Islam” and “Muslims” are terms covering many circumstances and eventualities. They appear most frequently to refer to “Islam” as a religion – in everyday life, the mass media and political contexts, as well as in textbooks containing selected information about the faith and its adherents for the history or political studies classroom or those specifically produced for the relatively recent introduction of Islamic religious education in German schools. We find ourselves confronted today with the increasingly urgent question of how to talk about Islam and Muslims in a world whose Muslim regions are frequently marked by violent conflict and mass refugee or migrant movements, and which political views we keep about those who practise this faith. A key issue here is helping upcoming generations of Muslims and non-Muslims alike to access the capacity for critical reflection on Islam early in their development into future citizens, i.e. at school.

Scholars of Islamic studies continue to debate issues of the relationship of the Islamic faith to history, society, politics and culture, as well as discussing, in those areas of the subject with an emphasis on interdisciplinarity, what exactly is the core content of the faith, proceeding from a notably broad basis of knowledge about Islam and Muslim-influenced societies and their cultural and historical intertwinements (cf. Poya & Reinkowski 2008). This view of Islam might best be described as kaleidoscopic, permitting as it does the attainment of varying insights and perspectives in accordance with the discipline through which it approaches its subject. An open approach to history allows historians to unlock issues around the relationship between a posited “core” Islam and the diversity of historical phenomena which Islam has influenced. “Islam” can be perceived historically as a religious and political movement without an unambiguously identifiable regional centre, driven in the past as today by ethnically diverse individuals and groupings, which responded to and merged into variously
manifesting political systems in a series of different localities and emerged in hybrid cultural forms of expression and social structures (cf. Krämer 2005).

From a sociological point of view, meanwhile, we might consider the ways in which the Muslim faith and the range of religious practices with which it has been and is associated can be distinguished, when we examine historic and current “Muslim” phenomena, from the ways in which membership of and “belonging to” the Islamic community have been defined via such variables as ethnic background, cultural socialisation and “conversion”.

Considering this complexity, might we not be right to fear that textbooks are hopelessly overburdened with any expectation that they supply knowledge and information on “Islamic” phenomena? In other words, what should, what can textbooks today provide as a contribution to discussion of religious and political radicalisation in both majority Muslim societies and non-Muslim immigrant societies?

The experience of being involved in two studies, with different emphases, on Islam in textbooks at the Georg Eckert Institute would prompt me to respond to this question by doubting that textbooks as they currently are can add much to this debate; the descriptions found in textbooks find themselves falling victim to their own attempts to negotiate the core and diversity of Islam and the matter of who can be said to “belong” to the religion.

The findings of the studies we have carried out appear distinctly double-edged. In my view, in both the studies, “Islam” appears to act as a vehicle of symbolic descriptions of what can be regarded as one’s “own” and what belongs to “the other”, in each case with what we might call a “Eurocentric” and an “Islam-centric” variant, each of which seeks to establish and maintain boundaries. In this way, discussion of Islam as a religion serves to create unambiguity, emphasising the “core” of the faith to the detriment of its diversity and the social and cultural contexts in which it exists.

The first of these two studies revolved around depictions of Islam and Muslims in textbooks from various European countries (GEI 2011), while the second, in which I pursued a sociological line of enquiry, explored identities, matters of “belonging” and identification with specific lifeworlds in textbooks produced for Islamic religious education in Germany (Kröhner-Othman 2012). The first study revealed that European textbooks rarely present Islam to students as a multifaceted faith; instead, they tend to depict Muslims as a homogeneous community whose life is determined by religious rules. These books evince Eurocentric boundary-drawing towards Islam and Muslims most manifestly in the lack of discussion of Islam in books on colonial, post-colonial and contemporary history, which makes the Muslim world appear detached from the political developments of our age. While the pre-modern flourishing of Andalusia and the Abbasid period receive attention, the narrative appears to end thereafter, which implies Islam reached a cultural standstill at this point. There is no evidence in these books of modern post-colonial developments and therefore no trace of the rise of political Islam.

The Islamic religious education textbooks I analysed manifest their Islam-centric perspective in the symbolic boundaries they draw between Muslims and non-Muslims in the context of migration. Some of these textbooks attempt to simultaneously teach about the religion and meet the expectation increasingly placed upon textbooks to discuss Islam in a manner relevant to young Muslims with immigrant backgrounds; in so doing, they succeed only in depicting the societies to which these young people or their families migrated as essentially receiving Muslims as religious “others”. The presentation in this way of Islam as an “immigrant” faith, and concomitant
depictions of, for instance, the migrant experience as comparable to that of the *hijra* of the Prophet and thus as a particularly Muslim experience, appear to cast this self-defined Muslim difference as self-exclusion. One chapter of a publication defines the “core” of Islam in terms of a religiously-based value system which places family life at the centre, in alleged contrast to the values held by the majority society. This approach makes the centrality of family inaccessible to reflection and recognition as a value which appears in other lifeworlds or as a priority engendered by the experience and history of migration. These self-descriptions, with their boundary-drawing towards “others”, do not exclude societal context completely, but they do not enable students to reflect upon it, as they proceed from a conception of Islam as a religion which has a pinpointable “core” and which provides the definitive explanation for the phenomena described. In this way, I believe that these textbooks tend towards turning “being Muslim” or “not being Muslim” into an implicit code transporting individuals’ and groups’ cultural positionings in the post-colonial world or relationships of “belonging” in modern immigrant societies. Such encodings entail significant limitations on the discussion of Islam as a phenomenon in the classroom, and encourage students more towards thinking in polarising categories than towards critical reflection on and questioning of the idea of a “core” of Islam and of its actual diversity. Yet if young people are not enabled to attain the latter, we will have little chance against their political radicalisation.

REFERENCES