

Islamic Religious Education in Germany – An Overview of Origins, Legal Framework, Theological Foundations, Objectives, Teacher Training and Future Perspectives

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Abstract: The article explores the development and current state of Islamic religious education in Germany. Its origins are rooted in Germany's migration history, particularly the recruitment of guest workers. The increasing integration of Muslims into German society led to political and legal discussions about the introduction of a denominational religious education based on the Basic Law. The focus is on analyzing the legal framework, theological foundations, teacher training, challenges, and future perspectives of Islamic religious education in Germany. The aim is to provide the international readership with a comprehensive overview. The article emphasizes the necessity of an educationally, theologically, and pedagogically sound Islamic religious education. In the long term, Islamic religious education can contribute not only to the religious autonomy of Muslim students but also to fostering a pluralistic society.

Keywords: Islamic religious education, Islamic religious pedagogy, confessional orientation, self-education, critical reflection, experiences of discrimination, teacher professionalism, scientific foundation

Zusammenfassung: Der Artikel behandelt die Entwicklung und den aktuellen Stand des islamischen Religionsunterrichts in Deutschland. Der Ursprung liegt in der Migrationsgeschichte Deutschlands, insbesondere der Anwerbung von Gastarbeiter:innen. Die zunehmende Integration von Muslimen in die deutsche Gesellschaft führte zu politischen und rechtlichen Diskussionen über die Einführung des bekenntnisgebundenen Religionsunterrichts auf der Grundlage des Grundgesetzes. Im Fokus steht die Analyse des rechtlichen Rahmens, der theologischen Grundlagen, der Lehrkräfteausbildung und der Herausforderungen aber auch der Zukunft des islamischen Religionsunterrichts in Deutschland. Es geht dabei darum, der internationalen Leserschaft einen Überblick zu geben. Der Artikel betont die Notwendigkeit eines bildungstheoretisch, theologisch und pädagogisch fundierten islamischen Religionsunterrichts. Langfristig kann der islamische Religionsunterricht nicht nur zur religiösen Mündigkeit muslimischer Schülerinnen und Schüler beitragen, sondern auch die pluralistische Gesellschaft fördern.

Schlagwörter: Islamischer Religionsunterricht, Islamische Religionspädagogik, Bekenntnisgebundenheit, Selbst-Bildung, kritische Reflexion, Diskriminierungserfahrungen, Lehrkräfteprofessionalität, wissenschaftliche Fundierung

I. Origin

The following provides an overview of the origins, legal framework, theological foundations, objectives, teacher training, and future perspectives of Islamic religious education in Germany. These areas offer readers a comprehensive understanding of the specific German context in which confessional Islamic religious education is made possible in public schools. The individual aspects are not explored in depth but rather outlined to give a general insight into the topic.

The introduction of Islamic religious education and the development and academization of Islamic religious pedagogy in Germany are inseparably intertwined with the history of migration, particularly

with the recruitment of guest workers from Turkey that began in 1961. Initially, it was intended that these workers would return to their home countries after a certain period. Accordingly, measures and provisions were taken to ensure the reintegration of these people into their home countries.

Over time, it became clear that the guest workers would not return to their countries but rather would bring over their families and become a part of German society. Therefore, the federal states, responsible for schools due to Germany's federal structure, increasingly faced the urgent question of establishing a religious educational infrastructure.

Thus, the issue of whether and how Muslim students could receive religious education at public schools has been politically and legally discussed since around 1990. In some federal states, religious education for Muslim students was integrated into the already existing mother-tongue supplementary classes. Other federal states organized comparable teaching through the diplomatic and consular representations of the countries of origin (Muckel, 2001, p. 59).

From the outset, there were recurring doubts whether certain contents of Islam, which might become part of the religious education, were compatible with the values of the Basic Law and the educational goals of the state constitutions (*ibid.*). However, as Muckel puts it, there was also reluctance to „completely leave the field to the partially obscure Quran schools“ (*ibid.*, p. 64).

As it became clear that these mother-tongue makeshift constructions were not effective didactically and from an integration standpoint, various federal states offered new experimental forms of Islamic religious education, which were more oriented towards non-denominational religious studies. However, in Germany, the Basic Law guarantees denominational religious education. This will be explained in the next chapter.

Until about 2010, there was a phase of different pilot projects for the introduction of Islamic religious education. However, these approaches only reached about 3% of the eligible Muslim students. Most of the individuals involved in these trials were teachers of the mother-tongue supplementary instruction without theological training, who had been cost-effectively qualified through further training. From 2002 onwards, graduate programs for the university training of religious education teachers were established, but these were only minimally funded and staffed and were offered as supplementary study programs (Ucar, 2010, p. 18).

Based on the recommendations of the German Council of Science and Humanities for the development of theologies and religion-related sciences at German universities in 2010, centers and institutes for Islamic theology were established in Tübingen, Münster, Osnabrück, Frankfurt/Gießen and Erlangen-Nuremberg. In 2019, the Berlin Institute for Islamic Theology was established at Humboldt University in Berlin, and in 2022, the Paderborn Institute for Islamic Theology at the University of Paderborn. Alongside, the training of early career researchers in the fields of Islamic religious pedagogy (Islamische Religionspädagogik) as well as Islamic theology was elevated to a new level.

Presently, Islamic religious pedagogy can be considered an established discipline within the German academic world, and Islamic religious education is increasingly seen as a component of the school curriculum in Germany. However, many practical, theoretical, and not least political issues remain to be addressed, which will become evident in the following.

2. Legal Framework

In the Weimar Republic, following the establishment of the first democracy (1918/1919), a fundamental separation between state and church was enacted, a turning point of considerable significance for the churches and, by extension, for other religious communities in Germany. This separation marked the

emergence of ecclesiastical law (Staatskirchenrecht), which was practically exclusively formulated in relation to Christianity. The legal framework for *denominational* religious education was mainly anchored in the Basic Law after World War II, largely following the regulations that were valid before the war. Further crucial provisions can be found in some state constitutions and in the school laws of the federal states. The relevant provisions in the Basic Law are primarily contained in Article 7, with Article 4 also being significant, as it guarantees freedom of belief and conscience, which extends to the educational context, thus legitimizing denominational religious education as a manifestation of this freedom (Schweitzer & Ulfat, 2021, p. 82).

Within Article 7 of the Basic Law, denominational religious education is explicitly addressed in paragraphs 1 to 3:

- „(1) The entire school system is under the supervision of the state.
- (2) The legal guardians have the right to decide on the participation of their child in religious education.
- (3) Religious education is a regular subject in public schools, with the exception of non-denominational schools. Without prejudice to the state’s supervisory rights, religious education is provided in accordance with the principles of the religious communities. No teacher may be compelled against their will to teach religious education.“

These regulations grant legal guardians the right to decide on their child’s participation in denominational religious education. Religious education is to be considered a regular subject, meaning it must be treated like other subjects, and the state is responsible for its implementation, including the provision of training opportunities for teachers. The execution of religious education takes place under state supervision but in accordance with the principles set by the religious communities themselves. The Basic Law does not limit the term ‘religious community’ to churches but generally opens it to all religions, enabling a diversity of forms of religious education, although in practice, this primarily includes Christian, Jewish, and Islamic religious education. A religious community in the sense of the law is characterized by a defined membership and an organizational representation that acts as a contact for the state. Practically significant is also a sufficient number of students needed to offer religious education (*ibid.*, p. 83–84).

The constitutional formulation that ‘religious education’ must be „in accordance with the principles of the religious communities“ indicates that the teaching should convey the beliefs of the respective religious community as established truths. This requirement differs from a solely state-managed ‘non-denominational religious studies’, which must be explicitly neutral. According to state laws, teaching activities in denominational religious subjects require an official appointment by the respective religious community—referred to as ‘Vocatio’ for Protestant teachers, ‘Missio’ for Catholic, and ‘ijaza’ for Islamic teachers (*ibid.*, p. 84).

Articles 4 and 7 of the Basic Law not only provide the possibility but rather the fundamental obligation for the state to offer denominational Islamic religious education. Like any other religious education, Islamic religious education is subject to state school supervision and must comply with the provisions of the Basic Law. For this reason, teaching must be given in German to ensure equal educational opportunities for all students. Furthermore, it is necessary that the qualifications of teachers for Islamic religious education are comparable to those of other teachers at German schools (*ibid.*, p. 85–86).

A central unresolved issue, however, concerns the definition of ‘religious community’ according to the requirements of the Basic Law. Recognition as a religious community is a key prerequisite for the right to claim the rights regulated by the Basic Law to establish denominational religious education. This issue is particularly relevant in the context of Islamic religious education, as Muslim communities in Germany are organized quite differently from Christian churches. They are generally characterized by

national associations and do not require individual memberships, making the legally necessary precise assessment of their numerical significance impossible (ibid.).

The formation of a Muslim religious community in the sense of the Basic Law is further complicated by the significant theological and ideological issues within the Muslim community in Germany. Hardly any association can or wants to represent the entire spectrum of Muslim theological positions. As long as there is no pluralistically composed, independent Muslim religious community in Germany, there remains a risk of influence from nationalist and fundamentalist forces from abroad (ibid., p. 86). Another issue concerns the representation of different Muslim currents in religious education. This is particularly relevant for Shiites, as Sunnis numerically dominate in Germany by far.

For these reasons, the emergence of a ‘religious community’ as required by Article 7, Paragraph 3 of the Basic Law is not expected in the foreseeable future in Germany. Consequently, the ministries of education in the federal states have been examining alternatives to the constitutionally required religious communities for years. Thus, “advisory committees” controlled by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and staffed by Muslims were established. Instead of the demanded religious communities, these committees supported the development of curricula for Islamic religious education and enabled the active participation of Muslim associations (Engin, 2014).

Currently, Achim Janssen observes that in the states, „school trials, model projects, and mixed forms of Islamic (religious) education often dominate, sometimes titled as non-denominational Islamic studies, for instance. It generally does not concern ‘genuine’ religious education, i.e., such that is taught as a regular subject according to Art. 7, Para. 3, Sentence 1 of the Basic Law“ (Janssen, 2023, p. 90).

3. What is understood by religious education?¹

The Arabic word *fiṭra*, often translated as „original disposition“, „natural constitution“ or „innate nature“ (Hoover 2016), is a theological starting point for Islamic educational doctrines. The noun appears once in the Quran, in Surah 30, Verse 30: „So set your face towards the religion, hanif. Allah’s fitrah with which He has created mankind [...]“ Hartmut Bobzin translates *fiṭra* as „divine gift“ (Bobzin, 2012, p. 353).

This concept of *fiṭra* is often discussed in classical literature in relation to a Hadith, which reports that the Prophet said every child is born with *fiṭra*, and their parents make them a Jew, Christian, or Sabian (al-Muttaqī al-Hindī, 1985, No. 1308/ Mālik, Bukhārī, Muslim).

According to Muslim educational theorists, the term *fiṭra* captures the seemingly natural disposition of humans to seek and find God; humans are seen as needing religion and at the same time as being capable of religion (Behr, 2014a, p. 17). Generally, numerous Muslim theologians assume knowledge of the existence of God as part of the innate human nature. The role of the prophets is to purify, strengthen, and perfect this part of human nature (Hoover, 2016).

It becomes clear that although a Muslim view of humanity starts from a natural disposition of humans towards religion, faith and good behavior are primarily seen as mediated through socialization and additionally require an active dedication and attitude of the believing person. Thus, humans need guidance, inspiration, education, and upbringing to develop their natural potential. That is: „Only along the lines of a religious doctrine are children, according to the general Muslim view, capable of developing their own religious identity in terms of conscious positionality, regardless of spiritual disposition“ (Behr 2014b, p. 506). Therefore, religious education is an integral part of Islam and is based on the voluntary decision of individuals.

¹ (Ulfat, 2019).

What does a concept like *fiṭra* mean in terms of religious education? The core understanding of *fiṭra* is the ability and readiness of humans to try out religion and to seek their path in it. Based on the aforementioned Verse 30:30, it can at least be assumed that humans are open regarding God. They are capable of religion, meaning an active construction of a relationship with the transcendent (Ulfat, 2017, p. 281).

Education is seen as a dual process: the acquisition of intellectual knowledge (through the application of reason and logic) and the development of spiritual knowledge (derived from divine revelation and spiritual experience). According to the educational understanding of classical Muslim thinkers, opportunities must be created for both. The acquisition of knowledge is not seen as an end in itself, but as a means to promote elevated moral and spiritual awareness that leads to faith and righteous action (Cook, 2011, p. xxviii). Thus, the unfolding of one's potential (*fiṭra*) also requires „cultivation of the self“ (*tazkīya*).

Tazkīya means that individuals can recognize and overcome their negative traits. „Cultivation of the self“ is derived according to William Chittick from Verses 7-10 of Surah 91, which he translates as follows: „By the soul, and the proportion and order given to it; And its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right; Truly he succeeds that purifies it, And he fails that corrupts it“ (Chittick, 2007, p. 62).

Various paths can be taken to achieve a cultivated attitude, such as meditation, prayer, abstinence, donations, etc. By moderating oneself and one's dealings with the world, individuals can fulfill their responsibility before God (Ghandour, 2019). They have received this potential, which they must discover and develop.

For al-Ghazālī, the cultivation of the self is the central path of spiritual development in humans. He sees education as a necessary condition to cultivate everything that God has placed in humans for their happiness and spiritual benefit. Education in his view is both a prerequisite for devotion to God and itself a form of devotion (Alavi, 2007, p. 312).

Thus, cultivation of the self means both cleansing the self in the sense of turning away from all that is bad and refining the self in the sense of strengthening all that is good (Chittick 2007, p. 60-61). Consequently, from an Islamic-anthropological perspective, education can be seen as the promotion and stimulation of self-awareness and self-development of the intellectual, social, and spiritual abilities and potentials of individuals. It aims at „the ability of the young person, as they grow older, to increasingly take charge and be responsible for themselves—even in religious matters“ (Behr, 2014b, p. 515).

This anthropological view highlights that education is seen as a lifelong developmental task that takes place „in engagement with this world and in personal relation to the hereafter.“ This corresponds to a dynamic and development-oriented understanding of education, where the individual can reach independent positions and decisions, thus achieving maturity (ibid., p. 499-500).

Consequently, education from an anthropological Muslim perspective is „primarily conceived as self-education“ (ibid., p. 499). The task of religious education is to accompany and support young people in developing their potentials and stimulating their readiness to take the reins themselves and find their „personal stride“ in matters of faith and religious lifestyle (Behr, 2014a, p. 29).

4. Content and Challenges of Islamic Religious Education

The educational approach described above, according to the author's conviction, implies both the promotion of personality development and the ability to actively participate in a democratic society.

Content-wise, the curriculum addresses key topics such as Humanity – Faith – Ethics, the Quran and other sources, God and Creation, Muhammad as the Messenger, Society and History, as well as Religions and Worldviews. This set of topics is fully covered over the course of two school years and then revisited at a higher level of abstraction.

The didactic orientation of the instruction places great emphasis on critical reflection and independence in thinking. Students are encouraged to actively and constructively engage with their own questions of faith, individual biographical, and societal challenges. The instruction aims to enable students to make informed ethical decisions and to reflect on and live out their own spiritual and ethical positions in a global, pluralistic context.

Muslim students in Germany face a variety of challenges that can impact their educational experience and personal development. These complex dynamics require a high degree of navigation and adaptability (Güzel, 2022).

One of the main issues is navigating between two cultures. Many Muslim students must find a balance between the cultural and religious norms and values of their families and those prevailing in the broader German society. These cultural differences can affect various aspects of daily life, from dietary habits and clothing to religious practices, issues of sexual autonomy, citizenship, and more. The pressure to meet both the expectations of the family and the demands and norms of German society can lead to feelings of tornness and identity conflicts (Ulfat, 2022b).

Migration experiences and their effects are also significant factors. Many Muslim students are either migrants themselves or descendants of migrants. Challenges of integration, including language barriers, socioeconomic differences, and experiences of discrimination, can affect school performance and biographical development. Students must also confront stereotypes and prejudices that are prevalent both in educational institutions and in society at large (El-Mafaalani, Waleciak & Weitzel, 2017; Willems, 2020).

Furthermore, dealing with fears and prejudices against Islam can pose a significant challenge for students. The rejection of their religion can lead to exclusion and impact their self-esteem, which in turn can strain both their career paths and their relationships with their non-Muslim environment.

Another challenge is religious practice in a predominantly secular society. Adhering to religious prescriptions such as daily prayers or fasting during Ramadan can be challenging in a school or work environment that is not equipped for it. The need to adapt religious practices to an environment that sets other priorities can create conflicts.

To address these challenges, it is crucial that educational institutions create a supportive and inclusive atmosphere that respects and promotes diversity. Teachers who provide Islamic religious education often play a role as translators and mediators.

In conclusion, it must not be forgotten that Muslim students are not a homogeneous group. They represent a wide range of cultural, spiritual, and individually biographical attitudes and positions. This is particularly true for those who are generally distant from religion. It is a key task for teachers to take these students seriously in their positionality, to protect them, and to offer them an open invitation to participate regardless (Ulfat, 2020; 2022a).

5. Islamic Religious Pedagogy between Academic Rigor and Professional Training

Islamic religious pedagogy is a science that does not belong to the classical canon of Islamic theological disciplines. This means that it does not have a long tradition like, for example, Quranic sciences, Jurisprudence or other theological disciplines.

Indeed, there is also a pedagogical tradition in Muslim history. From the 9th century onwards, numerous treatises on pedagogy and didactics exist (Günther, 2006; 2016; 2020). This tradition of Muslim educational doctrines can be seen as a precursor and source of inspiration for modern Islamic religious pedagogy, but of course, it is not comparable to it as a scientific discipline.

Islamic religious pedagogy in Germany has developed in alignment with Protestant and Catholic religious pedagogy, which themselves have undergone a transformation into a scientific discipline over the past sixty years. This orientation does not imply that Islamic religious pedagogy is merely a replica or modification of its Christian counterparts. Islamic religious pedagogy has learned much from these disciplines, particularly in methodological areas, while developing a distinct content profile. However, it continues to be guided by the research areas and methods that have evolved in Christian religious pedagogy. Particularly in religious didactics, which reflects on teaching and learning processes in schools and has increasingly been the subject of empirical research, a considerable number of Islamic religious pedagogical works have emerged in the last fifteen years.

Now, teachers for Islamic religious education are trained at seven universities and four colleges of education in Germany. The most pressing current challenges are primarily the professionalization of teachers and improving the quality of Islamic religious education. A crucial question for the training of religious teachers is what specific competencies should be acquired during the first phase (study), the second phase (internship), and the third phase (continuing education).

Limited empirical research presents a sobering picture. Regarding the attitudes and value orientations of (prospective) Muslim religious education teachers, one study revealed that reflection on their own religious beliefs is only minimally pronounced among many of the participants (Zimmer, Ceylan & Stein, 2017; see also Tuna, 2019; Kamcili-Yildiz, 2021).

These results are thought-provoking, especially concerning the theological dimension of teacher training and the challenges it poses for prospective Muslim religious education teachers and their pre-existing beliefs and individual biographical issues.

For the quality of Islamic religious education, not only the competencies and attitudes of the teachers are crucial, but also the quality of the curricula and teaching materials. Especially for a young subject like Islamic religious education, scientific support and evaluation through empirical teaching research are crucial for quality assurance and further development. It is essential to ensure that the teaching contributes a scientifically reflective component to the education of Muslim students and adequately addresses their living situation in Germany.

The goal is for the training of the teachers and the teaching subject to achieve a quality that is on par with the training and teaching of all other subjects. Looking back shows that a good foundation has already been laid. Looking forward, there are many open questions that need answers. Addressing these questions requires competent young researchers in the field of Islamic religious pedagogy and, more generally, the establishment of a scientifically reflective German-speaking Islamic theological discourse that is oriented towards the realities of life, questions, and challenges faced by Muslims living in Germany and their children.

6. Research and Future

For a long time, the discourse surrounding Islamic religious education focused predominantly on institutional aspects rather than content-related issues. Initially, considerations about the form of instruction (religious education or religious studies), legal frameworks, and the expectations of politics, society, religious communities, parents, students, and teachers were at the forefront. The objectives, societal and political significance, and the integration and preventive effects were also intensively discussed. Despite

the importance of all these issues, Islamic religious pedagogy will only succeed in permanently establishing and further developing Islamic religious education through a scientific, theological, and pedagogical foundation (Ulfat, 2024).

There are several dissertations that have been produced in recent years and contribute to these questions. One of the early empirical studies examined the relationship with God among 10-year-old Muslim students, revealing that despite similar religious socialization, different orientations emerge depending on life experiences and individual decisions (Ulfat, 2017). This study underscores the importance of the emotional dimension of faith for religious education.

Further research explored the potential of Islamic education in Bavaria, analyzing Muslim children's and adolescents' self-assessments (Güzel, 2022). Such findings help educators and policymakers develop curricula that better address the needs of Muslim students.

The professionalism of Islamic religion teachers is another critical area of research. Studies focus on their pedagogical competencies, attitudes towards religious diversity, and self-conception, which are key to improving the quality of religious education (Ceylan, Stein & Zimmer, 2019; Kamcili-Yildiz, 2021; Mešanić, 2023; Stein, Ceylan & Zimmer, 2017; Tuna, 2019; Yağdı, 2021). These findings are crucial for teacher training and shaping religious pedagogical theory.

Additionally, empirical evaluations of competence-oriented curricula for Islamic religious instruction have provided valuable insights into improving the educational framework (Abdel-Rahman, 2022).

There are also works in the field of educational theory. One study for example explores fundamental theological and religious pedagogical principles of religious self-determination from an Islamic perspective and, based on this, develops a didactic model for competence-oriented educational processes (Topalovic, 2024). Another analysis examines the concept of correlative theology and religious didactics, drawing on Jewish and Islamic sources to explore the intellectual-historical development of the concept of correlation in theology and didactics, as well as its interreligious contextualization (Bartsch, 2022).

Islamic theology and Islamic religious pedagogy in Germany have the opportunity, within the context of a liberal democratic society, to prevent religious discourses from degenerating into identity discourses that lead to the self-exclusion of Muslims and to fundamentalist views. Instead, it allows for scientifically reflective theological discourses that provide orientation in the tension between internal Islamic differences on one side and a secular, plural, and globalized world on the other. Thus, with the help of Islamic theology and Islamic religious pedagogy emerging in Germany, shaped by the ideals of reason, openness, and equality, it is possible to enable Muslim youth and adults to think flexibly, change perspectives, and access religious self-determination.

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