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## Islamic Religious Education and Inter-religious Dialogue – A Case Study in Kreuzlingen (Thurgau)

*Andrea Rota and Petra Bleisch Bouzar*

The organisation of an Islamic religious education (IRE) for young Muslims in public schools<sup>1</sup> is a very controversial issue throughout Europe.<sup>2</sup> By making Islam visible and according it a form of institutional recognition,<sup>3</sup> the implementation of IRE classes can raise debates that reveal divergent perceptions and representations of Islam in the public sphere. In this context, the inter-religious dialog appears to be an important resource to overcome this potentially conflicting situation. Nevertheless, these practices also need critical reflection from an outside perspective that the science of religion can offer, as we intend to show in this contribution.

### **Islamic religious education in Switzerland**

In Switzerland, both school education and the regulation of the relationship between church and state is a cantonal matter.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in many cantons established churches have historically had the right to organise their religious education in public classrooms. Despite the number of Muslims living in Switzerland having grown in recent decades, the introduction of IRE-classes remains an isolated phenomenon limited to a few local experiences. The municipalities of Ebikon and Kriens in canton Luzern were in this respect among the first to open their primary schools to the local Islamic community in 2002.<sup>5</sup> This project has now entered its tenth year, but at its inception has been subject to much media attention and had to overcome the resistance of the Swiss People's

1 By public schools we imply publicly-funded, state-run schools open to all pupils and free of charge.

2 Mohr 2006.

3 Pahud de Mortanges 2004.

4 Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of April 18<sup>th</sup> 1999, art. 62, 72.

5 Kappus 2004.

Party (SVP/UDC), the major right-wing party.<sup>6</sup> Since then, further local projects have been launched in the municipalities of other cantons, such as in Wil (St. Gallen),<sup>7</sup> Rüti (Zürich),<sup>8</sup> and Turgi (Aargau).<sup>9</sup>

The following contribution focuses on one of the most recent cases: Kreuzlingen in canton Thurgau. In 2010, an IRE class has been introduced in the fourth grade as a part of a three-year pilot project, which would eventually be extended to fifth and sixth grade. The *Verein für Islam-Unterricht in Kreuzlingen* (VIUK – Association for Islamic Education in Kreuzlingen),<sup>10</sup> founded in 2010, is responsible for implementing these lessons. This particular case is intriguing as the project seemingly emerged and was able to establish itself very quickly. Unlike other cases, local actors appeared to be unanimously supportive of the initiative, with even the Swiss People's Party refraining from actively challenging it. The following discussion therefore has a double aim. First, the genesis of the project shall be briefly reconstructed in order to identify its milestones and the principal actors involved in its realisation, as well as the relations between these actors. Second, this case study serves to illustrate the underlying factors and discourses legitimising the implementation of IRE. It is argued here that in the case of Kreuzlingen, a specific setting which permits the merging of pedagogical, inter-religious and integration-oriented discourses can be identified as the main feature allowing a quick implementation of IRE in public schools.

This article is based on an analysis of grey literature and Internet sites, as well as on qualitative interviews with four project participants in Kreuzlingen, and one person who opposed it.<sup>11</sup>

6 Steiner Amri 2003, p. 46.

7 Alimi / Zuzo 2011a, 2001b.

8 Website of Esther Fouzi: <http://www.fouzi.ch> (12 May 2012).

9 Duran 2003.

10 Website of the *Verein Islam-Unterricht in Kreuzlingen*: <http://www.viuk.ch> (12 May 2012).

11 The interviewees have been selected due to their repeated appearance in the grey literature and the medias.

### The cantonal context

The canton Thurgau, situated in north-eastern Switzerland, is traditionally a Protestant canton with an important Catholic minority.<sup>12</sup> The cantonal Constitution (Art. 91) accords a public-law status to the Protestant-Reformed and to the Roman-Catholic Churches.<sup>13</sup> These Churches have the right to organise their confessional religious education (*konfessionelle Glaubenslehre*) in public school classrooms for free as a part of the regular school program, even though they have to carry all additional costs associated with these lessons.<sup>14</sup> According to Article 15 of the Federal Constitution (which refers to freedom of religion), children who don't wish to follow these courses have the right to be exempt from participation. However, since 2006, all pupils are also requested to follow a class in «Bible history, religion and culture» which is organised under the supervision of state authorities, and whose main aims are to teach the «essential contents of Christianity and to give insight into other religions».<sup>15</sup> As these lessons are deemed to be «non-confessional», it is not possible for students to be granted exemption.<sup>16</sup>

In Kreuzlingen, as in other parts of Switzerland, immigration from Italy, Turkey, the Balkans and Germany has been substantially increasing since the 1970s. In 2000, according to the national census data, 13,584 Muslims, representing almost 6 per cent of the population, were living in canton Thurgau.<sup>17</sup> In Kreuzlingen, this proportion was around 12 per cent, with 2064 Muslims living in the town on Lake Constance. The local Islamic minority is mainly organised around two ethnic-religious private-

12 Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz 2012, *Thurgau*, sub voce.

13 Verfassung des Kantons Thurgau of March 16<sup>th</sup> 1987.

14 Verordnung des Regierungsrates über die Volksschule des Kantons Thurgau of December 11<sup>th</sup> 2007 art. 43.

15 Departement für Erziehung und Kultur des Kantons Thurgau 2009, p. 7. All translations from the German are ours.

16 Amt für Volksschule des Kantons Thurgau 2009, p. 5. Interview with Judith Borer, 3 May 2012. Judith Borer, Catholic theologian, works as a teacher in both a high school and the College of Education (*Pädagogische Hochschule, PHTG*). At the PHTG, she is head of the Cantonal Office for Religion and School. She is also a member of the Roundtable of Religions.

17 Bovay 2004, p. 125. In 2000 the proportion of Muslims nation-wide was 4.26 per cent.

law associations, the Turkish-Islamic Association and the Albanian-Islamic community in Kreuzlingen.<sup>18</sup> In the eye of the project's promoters, the introduction of an IRE class in public schools is above all a response to recent religious pluralisation, which had become particularly visible in the cultural composition of some school classes.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the courses provided by the churches, IRE lessons do not as yet have an explicit legal base. However, the pilot project enjoys the same rights granted to the churches in terms of free classroom usage. Likewise, the state doesn't provide any financial support for IRE.

### Origin and implementation of the project

The starting point for discussion about IRE in Kreuzlingen's public schools can be tracked back to a 2007 conference entitled «Wie viel Religion braucht die Schule? Die Rolle der Religionen in der demokratischen Gesellschaft», organised by the Cantonal College of Education (*Pädagogische Hochschule Thurgau*, PHTG). The conference aimed to foster a broad reflection on the consequences of religious plurality on teaching and teacher's training, while stimulating «an inter-religious dialog in canton Thurgau».<sup>20</sup> In particular, a workshop called «Islamischer Religionsunterricht: Im Hinterhof oder im Klassenzimmer?» endeavoured to explore the benefits of moving Islamic religious education from the mosque to public schools.<sup>21</sup> This workshop provided the opportunity to establish a dialogue between Judith Borer, one of the organisers at the PHTG, and Rehan Neziri, imam of the Albanian-Islamic Community in Kreuzlingen, who was among the participants.<sup>22</sup> In ensuing months

18 Albanisch-Islamische Gemeinschaft in Kreuzlingen 2012.

19 Interview with Christoph Kreis, 11 April 2012. Christoph Kreis was the delegate for integration in Kreuzlingen. He presides over the *Verein für Islam-Unterricht in Kreuzlingen* (VIUK) and is a member of the Roundtable of Religions.

20 *Pädagogische Hochschule Thurgau* 2007.

21 Interview with Judith Borer, 3 May 2012. On this topic see among others Fouzi 2003.

22 Interview with Judith Borer, 3 May 2012; interview with Rehan Neziri, 16 May 2012. Rehan Neziri is the imam of the Albanian Community and a teacher of IRE in public schools in Kreuzlingen. He is a member of the Roundtable of Religions.

other actors joined the discussions, among them the newly-appointed Catholic deacon, Matthias Loretan.<sup>23</sup> These encounters lead to the constitution of a «Roundtable of Religions» (*Runder Tisch der Religionen*) in 2009.<sup>24</sup>

Members of the Roundtable include the Albanian and Turkish Islamic associations, as well as the Protestant and the Catholic Churches. Although the government is not formally involved in the activities of this group, employees from different public institutions are also members of the Roundtable, such as the Cantonal Counselling Centre on Religion and School, and the Office of Integration. Two head school-teachers and two teachers from the PHTG have also been participating.<sup>25</sup> Our interviewees drew attention to several factors which had helped to rapidly constitute this «formal-informal» assembly. Among the most important factors were the prior relationships between different participants, the wide range of institutions involved, and consensus on the importance of IRE as contributing to the integration of Muslims in Kreuzlingen. The Churches are explicitly distinguished as important actors for convincing public authorities about the validity of this project.<sup>26</sup>

As a result of the roundtable discussions, the *Verein für Islam-Unterricht in Kreuzlingen* (VIUK) was established in April 2010 as an umbrella organisation for enabling Kreuzlingen's Muslims to present themselves on the public stage with one voice. Its aims are to promote IRE, to ensure its funding, and to oversee its practical execution.<sup>27</sup> Currently, its directive committee is composed of two representatives, one from each Muslim community. Its president is the former delegate for integration

23 Interview with Rehan Neziri, 16 May 2012; interview with Matthias Loretan, 14 May 2012. Matthias Loretan is a Catholic deacon at the St. Ulrich parish in Kreuzlingen. He is member of the Roundtable of Religions.

24 Website of the *Interreligiöser Arbeitskreis im Kanton Thurgau*: <http://www.thurgau-interreligioes.ch/links/interreligiöse-arbeit-im-thurgau> (10 May 2012).

25 Loretan / Dschulnigg 2010, p. 2.

26 Interview with Christoph Kreis, 11 April 2012; interview with Judith Borer, 3 May 2012.

27 Statuten des Vereins VIUK.

in Kreuzlingen, Christoph Kreis,<sup>28</sup> while Rehan Neziri has been unanimously appointed as a teacher.

Following the roundtable discussions, the VIUK decided to adopt IRE curriculum from Bavaria,<sup>29</sup> using a textbook called *Saphir 5/6*.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, at the beginning of the project, a roundtable member and PHTG expert in the pedagogy of religion was assigned the task of supervising the pedagogical quality of the lessons, and to organise an evaluation of the project. The results of this external evaluation have been published in October 2012.<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note that the project in Kreuzlingen didn't establish any institutionalised exchange with initiatives in Kriens, Ebikon, Wil, or Turgi.<sup>32</sup> One of the reasons may be Kreuzlingen's proximity to Germany.

At present, the financing of lessons is provided by three sources. One third of the costs are carried by parents, one third by the Muslim communities, and one third by private and institutional donations, among them the Catholic Church.<sup>33</sup> In autumn 2010, the three-year project started with 24 children from ten different fourth grade primary school classes.<sup>34</sup> At the time of finalising this article it is not clear yet whether the project will continue, owing to concerns about securing further financing, as well as the submission in 2012 of a popular initiative at the cantonal level aiming to prohibit IRE in public schools.<sup>35</sup>

28 According to Kreis, he has been chosen due to his former profession and in order to guarantee an equal distribution of power within the committee. Interview with Christoph Kreis, 11 April 2012.

29 See Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Unterricht und Kultus 2004.

30 Kaddor / Müller / Behr 2008.

31 See the VIUK website:  
[http://www.viuk.ch/evaluation\\_des\\_iru\\_in\\_kreuzlingen.html](http://www.viuk.ch/evaluation_des_iru_in_kreuzlingen.html).

32 Interview with Christoph Kreis, 11 April 2012.

33 Loretan / Dschulnigg 2010, pp. 5; interview with Christoph Kreis, 11 April 2012; interview with Matthias Loretan, 14 May 2012.

34 Loretan / Dschulnigg 2010, pp. 3.

35 Interview with Rehan Neziri, 16 May 2012; interview with Christoph Kreis, 11 April 2012; interview with Matthias Loretan, 14 May 2012; interview with Willy Schmidhauser, 2 May 2012. Willy Schmidhauser is member of the Initiative Committee and the former president of the right-wing party «Swiss Democrats» in canton Thurgau.

### Actors and interpretative patterns

As discussed above, the introduction of IRE classes in Kreuzlingen was made possible by three types of actors: the representatives from Islamic communities and the established churches, pedagogical figures, and the local integration delegates. The interpretative patterns (*Deutungsmuster*) supporting the pilot project therefore sit at the intersection of inter-religious, pedagogical and integration-oriented discourses. This articulation has been facilitated by the individual competences of actors participating in the discussions, who usually traverse the above-mentioned fields, and thus are able to mediate between them.<sup>36</sup>

The interaction between these three argumentative horizons is traceable to the very beginning of the project. At one level, the conference organisers at the PHTG sought to examine the role of the school and pedagogical institutions in an increasingly plural society, as well as their possible contribution to the integration of religious minorities.<sup>37</sup> Yet at a further level, they also had an explicit intention to foster inter-religious dialogue in the canton.<sup>38</sup> This very configuration has been institutionalised within the Roundtable of Religions.

Therefore, the Roundtable can be understood as the main space where the three discourses merged further and integrated an extended circle of people and institutions. This group appears to fulfil two complementary and simultaneous functions. First, it serves as a «midwife», helping IRE to come into the world by assisting with the development of the lesson concept. Furthermore, it mobilises useful resources (e.g. knowledge about political processes and IRE-projects in Germany) to support and protect the project in the public sphere. Second, the Roundtable functions as a «probation officer»: it supervises and guarantees that IRE actually fosters integration and the peaceful coexistence between religions. For our interviewees, this was particularly defined as avoiding an exclusive focus on Islam and presenting other religions as well. The Roundtable thus serves as a «stage» where Muslim actors can

36 Interview with Matthias Loretan, 14 May 2012; interview with Judith Borer, 3 May 2012.

37 Interview with Judith Borer, 3 May 2012.

38 Pädagogische Hochschule Thurgau 2007.



prove their willingness to partake in the «bonne entente des religions».<sup>39</sup>

In this respect, French sociologist Anne-Sophie Lamine notes that public recognition of a religious community can be facilitated by its participation in an inter-religious dialogue, as this involvement will be interpreted as a guarantee of its «openness». This presence becomes particularly important for small religious minorities and controversial groups, and can explain the multiplication of local initiatives portraying a «cooperative religious plurality».<sup>40</sup>

The inter-relation of inter-religious, pedagogical and integration-oriented discourses that we find in Kreuzlingen is consistent with the «kooperatives Problemlösungshandeln» type, as proposed by Klinkhammer et al. in their typology of inter-religious dialogue.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, shortly after his arrival in Kreuzlingen, Neziri's first attempts to find a public school classroom more suitable than the mosque's praying space failed.<sup>42</sup> Yet, access to the school classrooms was quickly granted following the Roundtable's involvement. This example shows that in order to become an actor within the public sphere, (religious) minorities need an «insider» partner – in this case represented by the members of the Roundtable. Participation in an inter-religious dialogue therefore appears to be an almost unavoidable step for Muslims, not only to integrate with local society, but also to gain access to the public sphere. In this regard, the Roundtable can be considered exemplary of the role inter-religious dialogue plays as a constituent part of the local «regime of incorporation»<sup>43</sup> when dealing with minority religious communities.

For our roundtable interviewees, the introduction of IRE classes is a sign of fairness and equity vis-à-vis the Islamic community that, in their view, has the right to fully live out and transmit its religious identity to

39 Lamine 2005, p. 84.

40 Lamine 2005, pp. 90–91, drawing on the example of France.

41 Klinkhammer et al. 2011, pp. 24–25. In particular it is worth stressing that «in dieser Form des interreligiösen und interkulturellen Dialogs [treten] oft VertreterInnen von Religionsgemeinschaften mit säkularen VertreterInnen des Staates ins Gespräch» (p. 25).

42 Interview with Rehan Neziri, 16 May 2012.

43 Soysal 1994.

its children in the public sphere. At the same time, participation in public school is considered both a challenge and opportunity for Muslims in terms of – as some of our interlocutors put it – developing a «European Islam» compatible with the constitutional norms and values of the Swiss state.<sup>44</sup> The emphasis that the Bavarian curriculum places on respecting the democratic values and the rule of law is thus mentioned among the reasons for choosing this syllabus and the *Saphir* textbooks for Kreuzlingen's IRE.<sup>45</sup>

A closely linked argument in favour of IRE stresses the «transparency» gained by moving the lessons from the mosque into a public school. By offering a publicly accessible course in the German language, the project's promoters hoped to influence public opinion by positively dispelling suspicions that still surround Islamic education and Muslims in general, both in Switzerland and more broadly throughout Europe. Promoting transparency through IRE should therefore facilitate integration. For this purpose, the VIUK maintains a visible public presence, such as through its website. Similarly, a strong professionalization of IRE is considered to be fundamental for guaranteeing the quality and legitimacy of lessons, as is the scientific accompaniment provided by PHTG experts and the external evaluation.

These reflections inevitably lead to the selection of the «appropriate actors». The choice of Rehan Neziri as IRE teacher illustrates this dynamic within the Roundtable and the VIUK. Of Macedonian origin, Rehan Neziri studied Islamic theology and pedagogy as well as sociology of religion in Turkey, meaning he could provide IRE lessons with an academic and pedagogical legitimacy. At linguistic ease in both Albanian and Turkish, he also has the trust of both of the established Muslim communities.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, when he arrived in Switzerland in 2002, he quickly learned German and within a short period developed good relations with state teachers and the local Catholic Church by showing

44 Interview with Judith Borer, 3 May 2012; interview with Matthias Loretan, 14 May 2012.

45 Interview with Matthias Loretan, 14 May 2012; for an analysis of the *Saphir* textbooks see Frank (forthcoming).

46 Interview with Rehan Neziri, 16 May 2012.

groups and classes around the mosque and participating in inter-religious activities.<sup>47</sup>

As Lamine notes, inter-religious activities enhance the visibility and recognition of newly-established religious communities, while also contributing to the codification of what is considered the «religiously correct».<sup>48</sup> From the perspective of our interlocutors, this not only applies to religious extremists; also radical secularists are discredited. As one of our interviewees from the Catholic Church puts it, the state alone is not able to shape important fundamental attitudes of children. The churches see this task as their duty toward society, and further, in the name of a sincere spirit of dialogue, are willing to extend this possibility to other religious communities. The same interviewee also acknowledges that in the long term, renouncing their monopoly could reinforce the churches by helping to curb the progressive marginalisation of their religious education at school, which in many cantons has been replaced by a course under the supervision of the state.<sup>49</sup>

These affirmations suggest that besides the explicit aims formulated by the Roundtable,<sup>50</sup> the introduction of IRE may also have, from the standpoint of some religious communities, the «positive side-effect» of reinforcing religious communities themselves.

## Conclusion

In this contribution we aimed to present and discuss the role of different actors and interpretative patterns surrounding the introduction of IRE classes at public schools in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland. In particular, this case study shows the importance of interaction between pedagogical, integration-oriented and inter-religious discourses. Above all, the Round-

47 Interview with Judith Borer, 3 May 2012; interview with Matthias Loretan, 14 May 2012.

48 Lamine 2005, pp. 89–90.

49 Interview with Matthias Loretan, 14 May 2012. On the general trend toward a religious education class under the responsibility of the state, see Rota (forthcoming).

50 For the aims see Loratan / Dschulnigg 2010, p. 3; interview with Rehan Neziri, 16 May 2012.

table of Religions plays a pivotal role in the implementation of the IRE project. Two functions of the Roundtable shall be highlighted.

The work of the Roundtable clearly illustrates that inter-religious dialogue can fruitfully support the promotion of religious minorities. Due to the cooperation of different actors within this framework, the introduction of IRE classes has been astonishingly quick, especially compared to the previous, single-handed and unsuccessful attempts made by the Macedonian imam. As the more religiously-involved among our interviewees pointed out very clearly, this initiative is rooted in a deep interest and respect for the religion of others, and drew its strength from a fraternal dialogue.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, however, the dynamics of the Roundtable reveal, at least indirectly, the power relations and normative conditions behind the integration of the Islamic minority with the local host society, and its access to the public sphere.<sup>52</sup> Participation in inter-religious dialogue is required from these actors in order to prove both their openness to other religions, and their respect of the Swiss Constitution and values. Thus, the established churches, as the main promoters of inter-religious dialogue in Switzerland,<sup>53</sup> still play a fundamental role in the regulation of Swiss religious field, despite their declining influence over the population.<sup>54</sup> They achieve this by implicitly guaranteeing the trustworthiness of the other selected religious actors. In this role, they are still recognised by the state.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the success of this project and its positive reception by the public authorities and Muslim communities, the future of IRE in Kreuzlingen is confronted by a number of challenges. First, the financing of the lessons needs to be secured. Second, the initiative promoted by the Swiss Democrats and more generally the climate of anti-Muslim mistrust being actively promoted by right-wing parties in Switzerland

51 Interview with Mathias Loretan, 14 May 2012 ; interview with Rehan Neziri, 16 May 2012.

52 See Bennani-Chraïbi et al. 2011, p. 8.

53 Husistein 2008.

54 See Stolz et al. 2011.

55 See for instance Suter Reich 2010; Bennani Chraïbi et al. 2011, pp. 7–8.

constitutes a threat whose impact is difficult to anticipate. Third, the general trend in Switzerland towards religious education classes under the supervision of the state calls into question not only the organisation of religious education by churches in public schools, but also of the recently established IRE. The future of IRE will depend to a large extent on the ability of the actors involved to prove the integrative virtues of these lessons.

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Verfassung des Kantons Thurgau of March 16<sup>th</sup> 1987.

Verordnung des Regierungsrates über die Volksschule des Kantons Thurgau of December 11<sup>th</sup> 2007.

### **Links**

Albanisch-Islamische Gemeinschaft in Kreuzlingen: <http://www.el-hikmeh.net/de/> (12 May 2012).

Fouzi, Esther, *Islamischer Religionsunterricht*: <http://www.fouzi.ch/> (12 May 2012).

Interreligiöser Arbeitskreis im Kanton Thurgau: <http://www.thurgau-inter-religioses.ch/links/interreligiöse-arbeit-im-thurgau/> (10 May 2012).

Verein für Islam-Unterricht Kreuzlingen: <http://www.viuk.ch/> (12 May 2012).