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THE REPRESENTATION OF CHRISTIANITY AND THE WEST IN SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS OF A GERMAN RESEARCH PROJECT¹

(La representación de la cristiandad y Occidente en los libros de texto escolares en Oriente Medio. Principales conclusiones y hallazgos de un proyecto de investigación alemán)

Resumen

La finalidad de este trabajo es descubrir acerca de la representación cuantitativa y cualitativa de la cristiandad en diferentes países de Oriente Medio. Sobre la base de esta investigación, tratamos de estimular una discusión abierta sobre educación para la tolerancia religiosa y la paz, pues creemos que no habrá paz si no la hay entre religiones. Los principales hallazgos y conclusiones de cuatro países difiere considerablemente. No hay un enfoque monolítico en relación con el la imagen de otras religiones en Oriente Medio, pero existe una necesidad de diferenciación. También el clima de diálogo en asuntos pedagógicos es bastante diferente en cada país. No existe un enfoque netamente islámica o de Oriente Medio sobre la cristiandad.

Palabras clave: Cristiandad, Libros de texto escolares, Oriente Medio.

Abstract

The aim is to find out about the quantitative and qualitative representation of Christianity in different countries of the Middle East. On the basis of this investigation we try to encourage an open discussion on education for religious tolerance and peace as we believe that there will be no peace if there is no peace between religions. The main findings and conclusions of the four countries differ a lot. There is not one monolithic approach regarding the portrayal of other religions in the Middle East, but there is a need for differentiation. Also the climate of dialogue on pedagogical issues is very different in every country. There is not “the” Islamic or Middle Eastern approach to Christianity.

Keywords: Christianity, School Textbooks, Middle East.

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This report presents the main findings and conclusions of an investigation on school textbooks of four countries in the Middle East. In the last four years the currently used textbooks in Turkey, Iran, Egypt and Palestine have been analyzed. We read and analyzed all textbooks from primary school to secondary school of all grades in the countries of research. Although all subjects were investigated, the chief findings focus on the textbooks of Human Sciences, as Social Studies, History, Geography, Islamic Education and National or Civics Education.

The leading question was: „Which image of Christianity does a Muslim get during school education using the mandatory textbooks?“ That means that our focus has been on the representation of *Christianity* in the textbooks. However, this does not mean that we have restricted ourselves on the passages in which Christianity or Christians were explicitly mentioned. Rather, all references dealing generally about religious tolerance towards other religions, the explanations about the “Ahl adh-Dhimma”, about religious freedom and equality of the citizen, the portrayal of the crusades, the Coptic history and European history and culture were analyzed. In order to distinct the different kinds of references we differentiated between explicit, implicit and inclusive references.

The results of the investigation are documented in detail in two volumes with about 500 pages. They are printed and published in this month. The first volume contains the analysis of the Egyptian and Palestinian textbooks, the second volume contains the analysis of the Turkish and Iranian textbooks.[1] A summary of the findings and conclusions are presented as follows in advance.

1. Background

September 11 or the polarisation between Islam and the West in the recent years were not the background of this study. It did not start in an attempt to foster democracy in the Middle East or to interfere in the education systems of other countries, which are now very sensitive questions in the Middle East. Rather, the question raised in Germany in the 70ies and 80ies because educators mentioned that our own textbooks are lacking informing about other religions, esp. about Islam. Attacks on foreigners, wide spread prejudices and

stereotypes in the society showed that there are a lot of distortions and wrong images of Muslims and of Islam in our Western societies.

Hence, a Muslim scholar (Prof. Dr. Abd El-Jawad Falaturi), his Islamic Scientific Academy in Cologne and a Christian religious studies specialist (Prof Dr. Udo Tworuschka) started a project to expose “The Representation of Islam in German Textbooks”. The main criteria were to see if Islam is fairly dealt with and if it is adequately represented.

The analysis of German textbooks showed that despite good intentions there were many distortions and one-sided accounts. These findings were analysed thoroughly. And by the participating scholars suggestions for improvement were made which have already been put into practice in the most recent textbooks in Germany. The results of this ambitious research was documented in six volumes edited by the Georg-Eckert-Institute for International Textbook Research in Brunswick in Germany.[2] An English summary was published in Birmingham in 1992.[3] This project has been extended to all European countries since 1988 and is one of the very few research projects looking at issues from Mediterranean to Scandinavia, from Great Britain to Middle Europe.[4]

In view of this extensive and successful project the question has often been raised, when an reciprocal analysis of textbooks in the Middle East will take place, meaning how Christianity in schoolbooks in Islamic countries is presented. Since 1999 this analysis was being put to realization by a joint project of the University of Rostock and the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. Directors of research are Prof. Dr. Klaus Hock and Prof. Dr. Johannes Lähnemann, who is the chairman of the Peace Education Standing Commission (PESC)[5] of the World Conference for Religion and Peace (WCRP).[6]

2. Turkey

Information about Christianity can be found in Turkish school textbooks for the subjects “Religious Culture and Moral Education”, “Social Studies”, “History”, “Art”, “Geography” and “Tourism” .



In the subject “Art” the various stylistic eras of Europe and Turkey are described from the earliest times to the modern day. Within this framework, the Christian religious buildings of the Early Christian, Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Mannerist and Baroque periods are examined from an art history perspective. As for the religious significance and function of these religious buildings it is merely said that they are Christian places of worship. Apart from that, there is no information about Christianity.

It is true that in the context of early Christian and Byzantine art there is brief mention of the existence of a Christian tradition in Anatolia, with a description of the settlement and religious sites of the Christians. This is found in no other textbooks apart from the subject “Tourism”. Here Christianity is recognized as a factor which encourages tourism, as Christian tourists would want to visit the ancient Christian religious sites in Turkey. For that reason important Christian sites are named, particularly in the textbooks for the upper secondary school (grammar school, high school), as tourist attractions in a locality or region. As for the religious history and significance of these localities, however, few details are given.

In the Geography textbooks, the representation of Christianity is limited to giving the religious affiliation and distribution in the different country profiles. In the History and Social Studies textbooks Christianity is dealt with in the framework of European history and the clash between the Turkish dynasties and Europe. Essentially, medieval Christian Europe is described as cruel and repressive and, when compared to the Islamic world of the time, as backwards. The crusades and the Muslim rule in Spain and Sicily are presented as, among other things, a one-sided cultural transfer, in which the Christian world learned from the Islamic world.

The Reformation is also dealt with, and is generally represented as a movement which arose because the Catholic Church had become alienated from its core rituals ceremonies. The Christian traditions of Anatolia are largely ignored. In the subject “Religious culture and moral education” there is a chapter in a textbook for the primary school and also for the upper secondary school in which different world religions such as Judaism, Islam and also Christianity are introduced.

Here the history, liturgy and fundamental principles of Christianity are dealt with. Trinity, the belief in Jesus as the son of god, the cross and the resurrection and many other dogmatic issues of the Christian religion are explained. The main stations of the life of Jesus Christ are described as well as the preaching of the first apostles. Most of the authors give information on the main denominations of Christianity and the Holy Scriptures used in the Christian Churches. Also they give information on the holy sacraments, the service and the Christian holidays. So there are many details concerning Christian history, dogma and church life.

However, as well as errors of content and historical fact, presentation is marked by a traditionally Islamic point of view. The history of the indigenous Christianity is ignored and neglected. Greek, Armenian and Syrian Orthodox Christians who formed the majority of the inhabitants for centuries and lived in this region from the dawn of Christianity till the 20th century, are not mentioned. Christianity seems to be a European phenomenon or a phenomenon of archeological sites.

3. Iran

In Iranian school textbooks for the subjects “Geography”, “History”, “Muslim Religious Education” and “Social Studies” Christianity is marginally dealt with as a theme.

In Geography, Christianity is described neutrally as a monotheistic world religion. Its representation is confined essentially to brief, superficial descriptions of the external, demographic characteristics of world Christianity in its three denominations: Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy. The characteristics of the Christian minorities in Iran receive no mention.

Of all Iranian school textbooks, it is the history textbooks that contain the greatest amount of information about Christianity. Jesus, early Christianity, the Christianity of the Middle Ages in Europe, the Crusades, Protestantism, the birth of Christianity, the position of the Persian Christians in Persian Antiquity and in Sassanid Iran appear as themes. Any dogmatic information on Christianity or on Christian denominations is lacking. Even



the historical debate with Christianity is selective and incidental.

Nowhere in Islamic Religious Education is Christianity treated directly as a theme, and none of its historical, dogmatic or religious content, or its various manifestations, are mentioned. The Christian traditions in Iran are also ignored. In many stories the function of Christians is to testify to the glory and truthfulness of Islam, after which they finally convert to Islam. Such an approach cannot create an attitude of tolerance towards Christianity.

In Social Studies textbooks Christianity is described as a divine religion which has spread throughout the world. It is true that Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, important prophets for Christians, are dealt with, but they are presented purely from an Islamic perspective. Their significance for other religions such as Judaism or Christianity is not explained. This is problematic since, in contrast to Islamic Religious Education classes, Christian students also attend these lessons, and see these prophets in a different light.

4. Egypt

Unlike Judaism, Christianity is, in principle, judged favourably, even though it receives scant mention. The birth of Jesus is judged as "a great religious development" within the story of salvation, and Christ's message is described in positive terms. "He called for peace, for the love of God and humankind, for brotherliness and tolerance..." The problem is that, beyond these few words, almost no further information is provided. The Cross and Resurrection, Incarnation and Son of Godship, the Trinity and the structure of the Church, the central rituals and holidays, and the various denominations - all these receive no mention, let alone explanation. Whatever differentiates the Christian faith from the Islamic remains unsaid, and as a result Christianity as a religion appears identical with or part of Islam. But how can a student learn to accept Christians if he knows nothing about their faith?

In an appendix only recently inserted into a Social Studies and a History textbook a considerable amount of sound information is given about Coptic Christianity up until the Arab conquest. The founding of the Coptic Church, the Catechet-

ic School of Alexandria, the origins of monasticism in its various forms, the oppression by Byzantium are described knowledgeably and in great detail. Towards the end, the national unity of Christians and Muslims in Egypt is emphasized through two Hadiths. Egypt is the only one of the countries examined whose school textbooks contain such a long description of the history of its indigenous Christianity. This surely sets an example to others, although some of the details could be improved upon.

However, the problem lies in the fact that after 640, indigenous Christianity virtually disappears. Anyone reading the school textbooks would think that, just like the Pharaonic or Roman eras, the Coptic era, too, belonged to a bygone age, from which only scattered ruins are still to be seen. Christians appear as stereotypes, as objects of the Arab rulers' tolerance (while ignoring the periods of repression), as subjects from whom taxes were to be raised and whose ancient churches and monasteries serve today as tourist sights.

Not a word is said to show how Egyptian culture over the centuries was shaped in part by Coptic Christianity, which even today is an extremely active religion in Egypt. In the 20th century it has been experiencing a considerable revival, having grown to an international community of some 200 congregations and churches in Europe, America, Africa and Australia as well. Only in the description of the movement for independence, the Christian-Muslim solidarity is briefly mentioned. Nowhere is there an illustration of the Pope, a priest, an act of worship or other activity, with the result that the Coptic tradition seems to belong to an age which may be admired, but which is now long gone.

Western Christianity is viewed primarily as a military and economic rival in the following depictions

- a) The campaigns of conquest during the early Islamic period
- b) The crusades, which are dealt with in great detail, contrasting the bloody capture of Jerusalem with its recapture by Muslim forces without bloodshed
- c) The colonial period and the struggle for independence.



The colonial period follows the Crusades without a break. They are regarded as the direct continuation of the Crusades by other means: What the crusaders were unable to achieve militarily, the "modern crusaders" attempt, but indirectly, by economic warfare. In this way colonialism and exploitation become a purely Western Christian affair, while the colonialism and exploitation of countries by Arabs, Mamelukes and Ottomans is not acknowledged.

The Christian West is characterized as not being religious and as a culturally inferior culture, which only began to flourish in the Renaissance through its encounter with Islam. The principal task of the state and of each citizen, therefore, is to defend themselves against the threat from outside. The fact that from the 19th century the Middle East received powerful cultural influence from Europe, and that Europeans made a major contribution to Egypt's intellectual, cultural, economic and religious reawakening is not treated as a theme. Modes of cooperation that exist today on many levels with Europe, are not mentioned anywhere. In this respect the picture drawn, especially of Europe, is distorted, and does not stand up to scrutiny.

5. Palestine

In the new Palestinian school textbooks edited since the year 2000, Muslims are informed peripherally about the Christian religion.

In the *Islamic Religion* textbooks, the Islamic view of Christianity predominates. Jesus is portrayed as a prophet who in the Gospel received a provisional revelation, which like that of Moses was directed solely towards the people of Israel. His work was restricted in both history and locality, whereas the work of Muhammad is of significance for all times and all peoples. Tolerance towards non-Muslims based on Sura 60, 8-9 is attached to the condition that peace can only be made with those enemies who have not driven Muslims out of their homes, or otherwise fought against Islam. It remains unclear what this means in practice for Christians and Jews. The view of society conveyed is one of a closed, conservative Islamic society.

By way of contrast, the *Civic Education* textbooks emphasize the pluralism of Palestinian soci-

ety, and tolerance towards other religions is frequently called for. Such tolerance holds good not only towards the people of the book but towards all religions, and is founded on the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 which is quoted several times.

Polite, respectful dealings between Christians and Muslims in Palestine are learnt through practical activities. The children are encouraged to visit each other on holidays, to visit Christian sites and to inform about the work of Christian institutions. The equality of Christianity and Islam is often stressed in texts and pictures, although Christianity in Palestine has become a very small community due to its emigration. This surely sets an example to other textbooks in the Middle East. However, the Muslim student learns nothing about the central teachings of Christianity, about how the church as an organization has evolved or about the different denominations.

A good example for citizenship is set in the textbooks. It calls for practical tolerance towards the indigenous Christianity, but information about the history and development of oriental Christianity receives only peripheral mention. The basic problem lies in the planning of the history textbooks. Since grade 6 is presented with the "History of the (pagan) Arabs and the Muslims", and grade 8 with the "History of Islamic-Arabic culture", there is automatically little room for the history of Middle Eastern Christianity. Furthermore, when the definition of the cultural context of Islam includes the displacement of the original languages, the Islamization of the peoples and the appropriation of earlier cultures as constituent elements, it is proven that Oriental Christianity is perforce excluded.

It is true that at several points Islam is referred to as being linked to Oriental Christianity, as having received from it the inheritance of the ancient cultures, and that its wealth was based substantially on taxes raised from Christians. However, such indirect references do not do justice to the continuous contribution made by Middle Eastern Christians to Arab-Islamic culture right up to the present day.

In the history textbook for grade 7 entitled "History of the Middle Ages" the focus is specifically on Europe and the Catholic Church, with the aim of understanding the background to the cru-



sades. Clearly it attempts to achieve an objective representation. This indeed has to be praised.

Numerous errors, however, are made. For example, the church is defined as a building, rather than a community of believers, and is described as a European phenomenon. In explaining the hierarchy of the Catholic Church it is claimed that a priest presides over a diocese and that the roman catholic Pope appoints the Patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and Constantinople who are not under his jurisdiction, but are autocephalous heads of byzantine-orthodox churches. Special forms of medieval monasticism are explained, though monasticism itself is only briefly and insufficiently elucidated in footnotes.

The accusation made against the Church and the European rulers is that their lust for power was the principal motive for their expansionist endeavours, whereas the expansionism of the Arab and Mameluke dynasties is stylized as liberation. Certainly the attempt is made to counteract a crude concept of the enemy by referring to religious and social motivation, some cultural achievements and today's good economic relations with Europe. How Europe flourished from the encounter with the Middle East is also described.

Unlike in the Egyptian textbooks, the capture of Jerusalem is not given a central position in the historical description, nor pictured in its full brutality. Rather, the critical comment is made that the policies of the Egyptian Fatimids played a decisive part in enabling the crusaders' offensive to succeed. And the recapture is also not given as a glorification of Saladin. The representation of Western Christianity is therefore ambivalent.

Also it is remarkable that all the negative references on Jews and Judaism, which were in the previously used reprints from Egypt and Jordan have been erased completely. Jews are not characterized anymore as "the people of treachery and betrayal" and as the "enemies of the Muslims and of God", as "people unloyal to their states and their neighbours" as it is still usual in the Egyptian textbooks. This indeed has to be praised.

The new Palestinian textbooks, however, explicitly avoid to mention Jews and Judaism. They only speak sometimes of the "people of the book" and the "tolerance towards the monotheistic religions" and this, of course, includes the Jews. In the revision, it was, nevertheless, an important

step to erase all the anti-judaistic references. This sets an example for many other textbooks in the Middle East, which is remarkable because they have been criticized in the West more than any other textbooks for "anti-semitism" and for producing a "war curriculum". This is definitely not true. Palestinian textbooks encourage and foster religious tolerance. The only problem is that they explicitly refuse to mention the Jews. But strategic avoidance is not the same as an education for intolerance.

6. The Feedback to our Findings in the Countries of Research

In all countries of research we have been in close connection with Christian and Muslim representatives, discussing the results of our investigation. Hence the feedback to our academic research is as different as the results are.

Turkey

In November 2001 there was a conference in Istanbul with Professors of the Islamic Theological Faculty of Ankara University and representatives of the different Christian denominations in Turkey (Greek, Armenian and Catholic). The main findings and conclusions of the investigation were presented and discussed. This was one of the first occasions for such a concrete interreligious exchange in the country. The participants appreciated much the German study and surprisingly even agreed on the most improvements proposed by the German researchers.

Prof. Dr. Mualla Selçuk, general director for religious education in the Ministry of Education in Turkey, expressed at the "International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation to Freedom of Religion and Belief, Tolerance and non Discrimination" in Madrid only a few weeks later that there is the intention to improve the representation of other religions and cultures and that the German study could play an important role to implement this revision.

In fact, the first steps in this direction have been made. On the basis of the information about the results of our project given to the Turkish Ministry of Education, the ministry asked the Christian churches in Turkey to make proposals for the correction of the textbook chapters dealing



with Christianity and explaining basic elements of Christianity for the Turkish textbook authors. So the chances that the academic study will even have a practical consequence is promising as it serves as a base of the national revision of the textbooks.

Egypt

In Egypt I had in October 2002 private talks with representatives of the Al-Azhar and the Egyptian Ministry of Education as well as with leaders of all Christian denominations in Egypt to discuss the results of our findings.[7] In September 2003 we invited Prof. Dr. Es-Sayed El-Shahed from the Al-Azhar and Dr. Sameha Sedhom-Peterson from the Ministry of Education to a International Symposium on textbook research in Nuremberg to respond to our findings.

The Egyptian feedback has been very different from the Turkish. In Egypt the discussion on revision of textbooks is a very sensitive issue, which since years has caused heated discussions in politics and the media. The Minister of Education and the Minister of Religious Endowments, Prof. Baha El-Din and Prof. Mahmoud Zaqzouq have defended rumors again and again that there are attempts of Western countries to interfere in the religious curricula. The results have not so much been questioned—in fact many have been confirmed—, rather the fact that we as Western scholars have undertaken such an investigation on textbooks of a foreign country at all. This is already considered an interference in national issues.

Apart from this political question a lot of principal problems have been raised which have to be discussed before any further academic discussion on textbook revision can take place.

1. Are textbooks at all a primary source for building identity? Is the social context and the teachers' role not more important?
2. Does detailed information about other religions foster tolerance or can it cause intolerance and interreligious quarrels as well?
3. Does Islam allow only an inclusive perception of Christianity, in which only the common ground is described? Is it necessary to portray the self perception of other religions including the major differences? Is a detailed authentic description of other religions a form of mission?
4. Can the religions contribute in the education

for peace and tolerance or should they be kept out of an education for tolerance?

Despite these obstacles there are still chances to continue the dialogue. The proposal to form a joint committee with historians and educators was highly welcomed and all partners were interested to continue the debate.

Iran

Textbooks in Iran almost give no information about the Christian religion. Christians are only sometimes mentioned in History and Islamic Education textbooks when they convert or when they praise the superiority of the Islamic religion. In spite of this fact, there was very positive feedback by officials and intellectuals in regard of the investigation when research fellows of the project visited Iran in September 2002. President Khatami appreciated the investigation very much. He sent an official letter to the Ministry of Education for consideration. In a following letter to the research team he inquired about detailed results and encouraged the German researchers to continue the dialogue.

Prof. Said Edalatnezhad was sent to the symposium on textbooks in Nuremberg last year and informed us that the Ministry of Education announced its readiness for revision in some of the criticized points. In one point he raised similar questions as were raised in Egypt and asked what the duty of a textbook author is. According to the viewpoint of Iranian authors it is their duty to express the truth on religions, and this truth can only be found in the Koran and Islam. But from the viewpoint of the German researchers the duty of a textbook author is to express the authentic ideas and thoughts of various religions in such a manner that any adherent of this religion feels that the books reflect their viewpoints. So, according to him, the main controversy stems not from theological differences, but from the theoretical and methodological approach used.

Palestine

In Palestine officials welcome contributions of qualified educators, but reject propagandistic media reports or interference as it has been practiced by the American-Israeli "Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace".[8]



We did not have talks to Muslim or Christian representatives till now as we only recently finished our investigations, but I am in permanent close contact with the Dr. Salah Yassin, the director of the Palestinian Curriculum Center. We exchanged many informations and discussed via email on issues in Palestinian textbooks. He explicitly asked the Georg-Eckert-Institute for International Textbook Research and myself for cooperation in the portrayal of other religions and human rights issues. So there is a base of confidence for further consultations in the future.

7. Conclusion

The research project on “The Representation of Christianity in Textbooks of Mainly Islamic countries” is not a meant to interfere in educational matters in the Middle East. It is not a part of the US plans for fostering the democratization in the Middle East nor is it a plan of the EU or the German government. It is an academic project which started with the knowledge about the distortions, the prejudices and hostile images in the textbooks of our own society, which had to be improved and still have to be improved. The findings and proposals are documented in six volumes.

In order to complement this study of the presentation of Islam in German and European textbooks and in accordance with most interna-

tional textbook studies we started a reciprocal research on Middle Eastern textbooks. The aim is to find out about the quantitative and qualitative representation of Christianity in different countries of the Middle East. On the base of this investigation we try to encourage an open discussion on education for religious tolerance and peace as we believe that there will be no peace if there is no peace between religions.

The main findings and conclusions of the four countries differ a lot. There is not one monolithic approach regarding the portrayal of other religions in the Middle East, but there is a need for differentiation. Also the climate of dialogue on pedagogical issues is very different in every country. There is not “the” Islamic or Middle Eastern approach to Christianity.

In order to enlarge the different perspectives of how Christianity and other religions are portrayed in Middle Eastern textbooks and in order to analyze the different approaches for an education for peace and tolerance we have already started to extend our project. Provided with the support of the German Association for Research (“Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft”) we started to analyze the textbooks of Algeria, Syria, Jordan and Libanon with the same methodology. We hope that we can finish the project with two additional volumes in 2005.

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- [5] Homepage of the PESC: www.religionsforpeace.net/Germany/pesc.
- [6] Homepage of the WCRP: www.wcrp.org.
- [7] The representatives were *Nadya Gamal El-Din*, director of the National Center for Educational Research and Development (NCERD), *Prof. Es-Sayed El-Shabed* from the Al-Azhar University and *Prof. Muhammad Shama* on behalf of the Minister for Religious Endowments, *Bishop Yuhanna Qulta* from the Coptic Catholic Church, *Rev. Dr. Safwat al-Bayadi*, church president of the Coptic Evangelical Church, *Dr. Rasmy Abd al-Malik*, dean of the High Institut of Coptic Studies of the Coptic Orthodox Church.
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