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The Training of Imams and Teachers for Islamic Education in Europe
Introduction

Although the history of Islam in Europe pre-dates the history of migration to Europe, the presence of Islam is often perceived as a migration phenomenon and also discussed accordingly. Muslim symbols having been accepted as a matter of course for centuries in Europe are viewed as a danger to Western civilisation and various measures are used to limit the presence of Muslim symbols in public in order to counter the growing fear of Islam. The headscarf debate in France and the minaret problem in Switzerland are only a few examples of this kind of public discussions.

Following September 11 and the growth of religiously legitimated violence in Islamic countries, however, the focus of discussion moved to Imams and teachers of religion as actors aiding Muslim isolation and lack of willingness to integrate and they became central figures in the debate on Islam. With great enthusiasm politics discovered the Imams as the scapegoats of the failed integration of Muslims in Eu-
rope and made Muslim integration dependent on the contribution of the Imams. An integrated Imam trained in Europe was to promote Muslim integration, prevent violence, resolve contradictions between society and Muslims and further Islamic enlightenment. With this objective an attempt was made, on the one hand, to rediscover the existing institutions for Imam training in Balkan states and, on the other hand, new educational institutions were established at European universities to train Europe-compliant Imams. Because of the central role of Imams in the lives of Muslims, the training of Imams and teachers of religion is given an important role in the process of Muslim integration. There isn’t currently a country in Europe with a Muslim population which is not affected by this development.

With this contribution we would like to demonstrate these developments in the example of some European countries, in particular which measures these countries used to respond to the challenge of training Imams and teachers of religion and how they try to contextualise Islam.

However, before dealing with this process, it is necessary to describe the position of these two professional groups from a Muslim perspective in order to objectify the expectations placed on Imams and teachers of religion.

**Imams and Teachers of Religion in Islam**

The term Imam originates in the Arabic root *amāma* (translated as: *in the presence of*) and carries several meanings, such as prayer leader, leader, master, guide or point of reference (Wehr, 1998, p.39).

The Qur’an uses the term Imam in the meaning of leader, example or guide and provides in a few verses an implication of the importance of an Imam rooted in Islamic history. Imam describes the prayer leader during congregational prayers, a caliph or, in the Shiite context, a religious leader (“Islam Ansiklopedisi”, 2010, p.178). Each serve in their role as an example or leader for Muslims in the sense in which
the term Imam is, for example, described in verse 32/24 of the Qur’an: “And We made some of them examples guiding (their followers) in accordance with Our command after having shown patience and being sure about our signs” (Paret, 2007, p.291). In the European context the meaning of Imam as prayer leader is of relevance.

In his function as prayer leader the Imam does not occupy a religious office and any male Muslim knowing the ritual prayer and capable of reciting passages from the Qur’an by heart can assume this role (Ceylan, 2010, p.21). A woman may only lead a group of women in prayer. Preaching is also amongst the task of the Imam, because in addition to the five daily compulsory Muslim prayers he also leads the Friday prayer of which the Ḥuṭba (the Friday sermon) is an integral part.

Prophet Muhammed is considered the first Imam in his role. The prophet combines both the roles of teacher and Imam in his person. Therefore, these two roles could not be separated until the Abbasid period. Initially, the key role for Imams was that of teachers for disseminating the Qur’an, with being Imam of a mosque coming secondary.

According to Islamic sources Imams as a professional group were only remunerated in a few cases for their activities in the mosques during the 10th century.

During the Ottoman Empire the Imams gained a decisive role within the administration. Not only were they prayer leaders or preachers in a mosque, they also assumed certain administrative tasks for the empire and were e.g. responsible for the registration of births and deaths, school inspections in the district, safeguarding of morals, marriages, pastoral care in the military etc. (Beydilli, 2000, p.183).

During the final centuries of the Ottoman Empire the position of the Imams was repeatedly questioned, following which the state discharged the Imams of almost all their governmental duties and reduced their activity with the exception of the ritual washing of the dead. In addition to political reasons, this decision was taken mainly due to the low level of education and an extreme politicisation of the Imams (Beydilli, 2001). The Turkish historian Ergin considered this

\[\text{Other Qur’anic citations are:}\]
\[2/124, 11/17, 15/79, 17/71, 21/73, 25/74, 28/5, 28/41, 36/12\ and \ 46/12.\]
phase of the 19th century as a liberation from the rule of the Imams (Ergin, 1936, p.121).

Attempts to reform the level of education of the Imams through a new educational establishment in 1913 failed due to the consequences of the First World War (Beydilli, 2001, p.126). Only after the Turkish Republic was founded were the religious trusts and mosques in Turkey nationalised and the Imam training reorganised. In spite of these efforts the training of Imams in Islamic countries constantly remains a current topic in public discussions (Aydin, 2000).

With the Westernisation of the education system in Islamic countries numerous attempts were made to reform the theological training of Imams. However, except for superficial changes, no decisive change in the teaching for Imam training in Islamic countries can be detected.

**Characteristics of Imams**

The question of the characteristics of Imams has been subject to controversy within Islamic schools of thought since it cannot be differentiated whether these demands have arisen from a religious or cultural context. However, all schools of thought agree that an Imam must be an adult, healthy Muslim of sound mental state. An Islamic way of life is also expected from an Imam. On the other hand, the schools of thought do not agree whether Muslims may pray behind an Imam who does not lead an Islamic way of life (“Islam Ansiklopedisi”, 2010, p.188).

An Imam must also be capable of reciting from the Qur’an easily by heart. Whether the Imam should be remunerated for his performance is disputed amongst Islamic scholars. However, presently state remuneration of Imams is considered a necessity.

It is, however, worth noting that in the classic Islamic literature neither social nor additional scientific competences are required (Yavuz, 1977, pp.141–144). To meet the expectations for Imams from within this tradition is a particular challenge for Muslims in Europe.
A cursory glance at the history of Islam shows that the thoughts and actions of religious pedagogy are based on Muslims’ concept of man and the related concepts of God.

During the early phases of Islam people arranged their relationship to God through their questions which were answered for them by the prophet as mediator, explaining what God wanted from them in order to lead a conscious and, moreover, orderly life. In this dialogue-driven communication between God and man the relationship between living and learning or the experiencing of God within one’s life was still wholly authentic and the aim of prophetic education. Man perceived himself as having a living relationship with God.

In the period after the prophet the Muslim tried to understand his relationship with God through the guidance of the Qur’an and the life example of the prophet. Thus these two sources shaped the educational concepts of Muslims.

The Qur’an itself gives clear indications of how people can comply with the will of God, how they ought to be educated accordingly, however, is less clearly expressed in the Qur’an. This task already overwhelmed Muslims during the early period of Islam.

In early works on education in Islam, education is not seen as a process of teaching and learning but as a way of life. Therefore, man with his behaviour and conduct is at the centre of education. Islamic education was understood as mastering specific behavioural rules. Therefore, the first Islamic scholars writing about education were usually jurists grappling with the penal and retaliatory consequences of the violation of such rules in this world and the next.

Ghazzali, too, understands education in his most famous work “Ihya” rather as the regulation of a specific behaviour and explains the juristic and spiritual consequences of violations against this code of behaviour. This teaching centres less around the acquisition of world-
ly competences than around which acts of religious service might attain the pleasure of God (Tibawi, 1976, p. 187). Therefore, this can neither be called learning nor teaching in today’s sense. The historian Ibn Khaldūn describes this tradition amongst Muslims during the early period of Islam: “Teaching during early Islam was not a remit (vocation) but merely a verbal transmission …” (Khaldun, 1970, p. 30). The acquired capability of action aimed at attaining the pleasure of God. According to Ghazzālī education can only have the aim of increasing the obedience of the child. A reasonable person should turn his back on the world and prepare for the hereafter (Ghazzali, 1997, p. 64).

**Definition of Education**

In the Arabic language “Education” is described by several terms: tarbiyah, ta’lim, ta’dīb, irshād and tadrīs. These terms can generally refer to education. However, the etymological analysis of these terms includes various positions.

Currently, education is expressed in Islamic countries with the term “Tarbiyah” and describes in Arabic the process of development and maturing of a person. According to the famous Islamic theologian al-Rāgib al-Asfahānī, tarbiya is: “cultivating or developing the cause of something step by step until its perfection” (Tauhidi, 2001, p. 336).

In this understanding education is more than simply teaching or imparting something; rather education focuses on the development of existing characteristics of a person referred to in the Qur’an as Fitrah (Tauhidi, 2001, p. 7).

Based on this understanding, Islamic pedagogy is currently not perceived as guiding a child but as protecting and developing his natural disposition during a life-long process. Moral education as part of tarbiyah is the basis for a life matching the character traits of people (Taymiyah, 1994).

**Islamic Education throughout History**

Whilst the prophet was the only mediator between God and man, understanding the Qur’an did not pose much of a problem for people.
The Qur’an addressed the practised reality of life directly and with immediacy in a spoken and, more importantly, living language. Neither the content nor the language were alien to the people concerned. After the death of the prophet it became an increasingly difficult task to understand or interpret the Qur’an for people in a different linguistic and cultural context.

During the life of the prophet the Islamic teachings were invigorated and authentically modified by him. He brought the revelation to life. Many of his companions who subsequently contributed greatly to the spread of Islam did not accept Islam on account of extensive studies of Islam but only on account of meeting him as a person.

The prophet himself was part of their lives. The Qur’an did not only acquire human relevance due to his conduct but also due to how he approached the Qur’an. His actions centred around social justice, universal ethical values and the equality of man. Against this background Islam solved the daily issues and social problems of people as they arose in a particular context. The solutions for specific social problems were not based on laws but were aids to enabling people to live together.

Religion and society became more and more complex. People no longer encountered religion through the authentic living example of Muhammad but through the theological interpretations and the related understanding of scholars. Religious education and training now gained increasingly in importance in order to better understand the tradition of the prophet and the Qur’an.

Educating these people could not be left to the theological educational personnel or institutions. Besides the performance of the daily prayers, the mosques were in particular given this important task to educate people. This initiated the first phase of institutionalised education in Islam aiming at an education through the teachings and personal experience within the community.
Mosques as Centres of Training and Education

The private residences which were used in the early days of Islam to educate and train Muslims no longer met their requirements after the migration to Medina. Mosques were created which from the very start were centres of education and training in addition to their importance for regular prayer. The mosques were not only concerned with learning the revelation by heart, but also with developing a social concept to provide a foundation for social life and implement it for people.

A task of the mosque of the prophet was the promotion of writing and reading. Additional components required by society were built upon this. The prophet was open to innovative ideas and developments and asked Muslims to continually develop.

In the time after the prophet the mosques, rapidly increasing in number, retained their important role in relation to Islamic education.

Some mosques had not only one scholar but established several educational groups with different scholars. Muslims were prepared to learn. The scholars were urged to teach. New sciences kept developing to discipline this teaching offer. Teaching gained more importance than the religion itself. The theological understanding which had by then developed replaced the life-oriented religious understanding of the Muslims of the first generation.

The time had come to separate prayer from teaching. Many scholars who were also teaching in the mosques in addition to their everyday business were unable to meet the demand. They needed professional institutions allowing them to dedicate themselves to science.

Development of the Madrasa

The spread of the religion required professional work which could not be performed by the mosque. Science does not agree that the madrasas developed from the mosques. The creation of the first madrasa in central Asia favours the theory that the Buddhist temples served as blueprint for the Muslim Madāris (Tekindag, 1973, pp.3–4). Whether the
Sunni madrasa has its origin in Buddhist temples or in Shiite Darul Ilm centres (place of scholarship) is disputed. It is, however, a fact that the religions of a region fertilised each other and contributed to the development of religious culture in Islam.

The Madāris were not only schools for religious education but also offered other natural science subjects with relevance for the state and society. The quality and freedom of the Madāris, on the other hand, depended largely on the political and scientific orientation of the rulers (Bilgrami & Esref, 1988, p.29). This was e.g. also an important reason both for the flourishing and the decline of the Madāris.

From the XIth century the Madāris started to lose their scientific dynamics. This stagnation was unfortunately only noticed very late during the 17th century. During this period in particular the perception that science in Islamic countries was lagging behind the scientific developments of the so-called West also gained ground. The scientific stagnation in the Madāris had various backgrounds. The key reason was, however, that corrupt political interests were put before scientific interests.

Parallel to the scientific developments in the West the Madāris did not manage to reform. Political reform attempts failed due to the resistance of scholars who tried to justify their scientific backwardness with theological arguments.

Secularisation of the Education Concept
The golden period of Muslims in the 10th–13th centuries had passed. The period of intellectual fertility in an atmosphere of tolerance and scholarship lost its intellectual driving force after the 13th century. Scientific developments in Europe started to overtake the Islamic world. At the end of the 18th century Muslims were neither able to escape the intellectual defeat by themselves nor to recognize the development in the West, less so to catch up with it.

During a rapid process attempts were made in almost all Islamic countries to reform their education systems in accordance with West-