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Panel 5 – Strangers Within: Civic Education for Immigrant/Minority Youth

**„Understanding instead of Discriminating“: The Example of the „Abrahamic Youth
Forum“ on Religion, Everyday Life, Politics, and Culture at the Protestant Academy of
Arnoldshain (June 11 – 13, 2004)**

The Protestant Academy of Arnoldshain and its Background

The Protestant Academy of Arnoldshain is a Church-affiliated, yet independent educational institution with a strong tradition in civic education. In the democratic transformation of the Federal Republic after 1945, the Protestant academies in Germany played a significant role. It is since then that the Federal Government has entrusted them with independently-planned civic education programs that foster democratic values. Until today, the Protestant academies have preserved their reputation as the „third“ or the „other“ location – that is, as a platform able to bring together opponents or adversaries of diverse backgrounds to address pressing issues in society.¹ The Protestant Academy of Arnoldshain, where I work, is located in the vicinity of Frankfurt², one of the densely populated, highly multi-ethnic regions in Germany. In order to respond to the specific needs of the diverse population of this region, Arnoldshain developed an expertise in intercultural civic education and inter-religious dialogue (both for adults and for youth).

¹ One example is the intercultural education programs for police and administrators dealing with migration issues.

² In Frankfurt, approximately one out of three citizens holds a foreign citizenship. However, most recently, this number is slightly decreasing, which is due to the fact that more migrants have taken on German citizenship.

Intercultural Learning as Part of Civic Education

Our intercultural civic education programs have placed importance on the dynamic and multi-layered nature of culture. According to this model, culture is conceived as a multi-faceted and differentiated system of values, norms and patterns of behavior that allows for orientation and fosters identity formation. The cultural identity of an individual is ceaselessly being created and takes new shapes over and over again in his or her interactions within the social sphere.

Intercultural learning should thus focus on at least four aspects: 1) strangeness and communication, 2) recognition and diversity, 3) commitment to the struggle against discrimination and exclusion, 4) intercultural understanding as a global responsibility.

Intercultural learning aims at imparting intercultural competencies and the ability to engage in intercultural dialogue. Intercultural competence means to be able to communicate with others, acknowledging their cultural identity while being aware of one's own value orientations and cultural embeddedness. In this sense, intercultural competence comprises four dimensions: a) identity and self-perception; b) empathy and the ability to alter perspectives; c) distanciation from roles; d) the ability to tolerate ambiguity.

The Inter-religious Turn in Intercultural Education

However, in recent years, we have observed the strong effect of international conflicts (Islamic fundamentalism, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, etc.) on the intercultural and inter-religious communal life of individuals in German society: A large number of citizens tends to project perceptions and images of other religions and foreign cultures onto minorities living in German society while migrants living in Germany tend to project their experiences and fears with regard to discrimination on to German society as whole. As a result, they often withdraw from dialogue and build „parallel societies“.

Approximately 3,5 million Muslims are currently living in Germany, but contacts and exchange of ideas between Muslims and mainstream German society are still rare. For many,

to take a stance in the many debates and controversies concerning such topics as Islamic education as part of the high school curricula in religion or the wearing of head-scarfs is not easy: on the one hand, racist assumptions and clichés impede a realistic perception, on the other hand, presumably incompatible basic values and ideologies make the dialogue difficult. Given recent social and global political developments, what has become evident is the importance of dialogue between individuals of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds as a way to foster peaceful communal life within Germany's multicultural society as a core matter of civic youth education.

In the past, civic youth education in Germany has developed and realized productive models of civic education for Immigrant/Minority Youth aiming at their integration within German society. However, in light of current developments, these models needed to be reexamined and developed further. In addition to the social, political, and economic aspects, on which these approaches have been based, closer attention needs to be given to the cultural and religious dimensions determining the everyday reality of immigrants/minorities. This implies, for example, to address more thoroughly questions concerning the cultural identity of young people with a migration background, questions concerning their orientations and values as they are shaped by the cultural and ethnic milieus as well as with the religious communities to which they belong. This expansion of the perspectives of civic education for immigrant/minority youth simultaneously requires a thorough familiarity with the major systems of orientation in society such as the religious traditions of Christianity, Judaism, and of Islam, of humanist values as well as the basic norms of liberal, pluralist democracy.

The „Abrahamic Youth Forum“ as part of a larger project on „Democracy, Cultures, and Religion“

The „Abrahamic Youth Forum“, which took place from June 11 until June 13, 2004, though it had a unique design and thematic focus, was part of a larger joint-project entitled

„Democracy, Cultures, and Religion“ (DeKuRel). This three-year project, which is now in its concluding phase, was conducted by three major organizations responsible for civic youth education in Germany. More than a dozen of its member institutions participated, offering civic education seminars across Germany. The project was funded by the „ENTIMON“³-program „Youth for Tolerance and Democracy“ issued by the Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth; DeKuRel combined, on the one hand, civic education seminars for young people testing out innovative concepts with, on the other hand, the training and qualification of educators involved in the subject matter.

Target Group and Subject Matter of the „Abrahamic Youth Forum“

The „Abrahamic Youth Forum“ – the first of its kind – is based on the concept of dialogue between members of the Abrahamic religions. The Youth Forum brought together a group of young people between the age of 16 and 26 of diverse backgrounds: Christians, Jews, Muslims as well as other youth, who define themselves as secular and non-religious. Over twenty participants from all over Germany came to Arnoldshain, to engage during an entire weekend in issues concerning the reality and perspectives of living together in Germany and to reflect upon possibilities of how to improve communal life. The point of departure was their own life circumstances: What works out well? Where are conflicts? What are the possibilities of dealing with these conflicts? Who am I, and what are my experiences? How am I being perceived, and how do I perceive others? A key issue was to reflect upon the desires and fears that shape the various perceptions of self and other. The goal of the seminar was a first assessment of the growing antisemitic and anti-islamic resentments among Germany’s multicultural youth, and their effects on everyday life as well as to search for venues how to overcome these.

³ Entimon is a Greek word and means dignity and respect.

Preliminary Thoughts and Goals

The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) in Vienna reports a currently increasing antisemitism in Germany and other European countries. Experts agree that this new antisemitism cannot entirely be attributed to traditional right-wing extremism. They observe an increase of anti-Jewish resentments especially among Arabic youth – which can be largely explained as resulting from continuing conflicts in Israel and Palestine. Beyond this explanation, we must nevertheless keep in mind the possibility that these new forms of antisemitism may intersect with antisemitic attitudes handed-down within the mainstream of German society.

On the other hand, Muslims living in Germany are often the target of deeply rooted anti-Islamic resentment and discrimination. This is especially the case since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The conflicts being carried out violently in the theater of world politics thus impair the youth milieus of Germany's multicultural society and hamper the intercultural and inter-religious dialogue that is essential to an open-minded democracy based on pluralism and diversity. This situation also poses new challenges to the practical field of civic youth education. With the „Abrahamic Youth Forum“ we intended to implement an innovative educational program that combined cultural, religious, and political dimensions of communal life and that integrated inter-religious aspects within a seminar of intercultural learning. We made sure to create and maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect during the seminar in order to foster peaceful coexistence among a youth group of different backgrounds and character, in order to help dismantle prejudices and concepts of the enemy. In sharing their experiences with others, the participants were able to recognize a common, shared ground, but also to endure differences and tensions. With regard to the mixture of participants and the concept that both addressed questions of daily life in a multicultural environment and worked through highly-explosive fields of conflict, this year's

„Abrahamic Youth Forum“ was an innovative approach. It was an experiment that requires both continuation and further theoretical reflection.⁴

The Team of Pedagogues

The team consisted of three experts experienced in inter-religious and intercultural dialogue. The pedagogical design and concept development was carried out by two professionals, one of them a trainer in communication and conflict management, the other a high-school teacher who teaches Catholic religion. Furthermore, two pedagogical mediators – one from the Muslim and one from the Jewish community – also belonged to the team.

Contents, Activities, and Methods

The seminar program centered upon creative approaches to the themes; it gave room to intensive work in small groups, artistic approaches (for instance, drama presentations) and forms of presentation combined with classic discursive forms such as plenum debates.

For instance, the introductory activity found a very positive echo among the participants: Each participant was asked to introduce themselves from the perspective of someone else. This activity introduced the theme of changing perspectives that would become the core element of the entire seminar. This introduction was a crucial step in establishing from the very beginning an atmosphere of mutual respect, in awakening mutual curiosity. It created favorable preconditions for the course of the program.

One of the highlights was an activity aiming at the theatrical/mimic representation (like photo stills) of experiences of prejudices that participants encounter as members of a specific ethnic or religious group (how am I perceived?). For the „photo still“, the participants could use costumes and other objects (provide by the pedagogical team) as they pleased. Each „photo still“ showed an image expressing how one (ethnic or religious) group experiences themselves

⁴ A seminar for teachers and youth workers that will address the challenges posed to the fields of pedagogy by the new forms of antisemitism in Germany's multicultural society will take place in Arnoldshain in December.

as stereotypically perceived by the other. The remaining participants were asked to give their feedback to the „photo stills“. They were asked to describe what they saw, to describe instead of evaluate, to speak about their perceptions instead of facts, to respond to the concrete image and to speak about the role represented in the „still photo“, not of the person behind that role. The meaning of these presented images as well as the deeper anxieties that lie behind them were then reflected upon and worked through in a discussion afterwards. By doing so, we were able to open up the sensible dimensions of the subject by linking sensuous and cognitive approaches to the subject matter. A subsequent unit dealt with prejudices, their causes and ways to overcome them. In establishing connections through the previously-presented „still photos“, the work unit focused on the following questions: What causes these prejudices and stereotypical perceptions? What can I change? What can others change? Finally: what do we need to bring about such changes? To address these issues, small inter-religious groups were built (by drawing lots). Each group was free to choose the form in which they would present the results of each of their groups to the others (role game, drawings, posters, etc.).

After a basis of trust had been built among the participants through the above-mentioned activities, the more critical themes could be addressed: In an in-depth discussion in the plenum moderated by one of the pedagogues, the participants discussed current antisemitism and anti-islamism among young people in Germany. In the course of the discussion, the participants made suggestions as to how to improve the communal life and reflected upon what each individual, what youth organizations, politics, and religious institutions could contribute to achieve a better understanding of each other. One result of this debate was that several of the participants expressed their desire to participate in the planning and preparation of another „Abrahamic Youth Forum“ to be offered next year.

What created the most lasting impression on the participants was the religious elements of the seminar (although not all of the participants were religious). Some of the participants belonging to the respective religions joined in the preparation and enactment of these rituals:

the Kabbalat Shabat, the Moslemic evening prayer, and Christian prayer. During the seminar, these rituals served as a crucial connecting link, based on which the participants were able to recognize and reflect upon common and non-shared grounds between the three religions. Special question-and-answer periods followed after each of the rituals in which the meaning of these rituals and their elements were thoroughly explained. What at an early point of the planning stage had been meant only as a vocational offering for those who wanted to practice their religion during the seminar, became in fact one of the highlights of the seminar, in which all of the youth – regardless of their faith - participated with great interest. The experience of flesh-and-blood participation in the religious ritual of another faith that is not one's own and the opportunity to freely ask questions about every detail concerning the ritual was for many of the young participants an entirely new and immensely-enriching experience. Not only did this impart knowledge about the other religions, it also opened up unthought-of opportunities for dialogue. The preliminary assumption of the pedagogical team that it would be necessary to give closer attention to interactions between cultural, religious, and political aspects of communal life in Germany's multicultural society and to open up a space for inter-religious dimensions proved to be accurate.

Results and Perspectives

This first „Abrahamic Youth Forum“ at Arnoldshain was very successful – both the self-assessment of the pedagogical team and the evaluation given by the participants was highly positive. The group of participants – their curiosity, motivation, engagement, creative phantasy, discursive and reflexive abilities - surpassed all our expectations. I should particularly emphasize the mutual respect the participants showed each other – an aspect highly valued also by the participating youths. With this seminar, we were able to lay the foundation-stone for the inter-religious dialogue among young people and to approach a sensitive topic layered with strong affects. As mentioned before, it was particularly

impressive to experience the significance that religious elements can obtain as a „door-opener“ to mutual interest and dialogue.

However, our experiences also proved how difficult it is to approach in one and the same curricula a reflexion upon current antiislamic and antisemitic tendencies in such a way that it does justice to both sides. Since the „Abrahamic Youth Forum“ was geared toward the experiences of the participants, we did not include external inputs through lectures for instance. Some of the group (the intellectually more mature participants), however, said that they would have appreciated such an input since it would have confronted them with concrete facts and research about antisemitism and antiislamism currently on the rise in order to become better acquainted with the objective side of the developments. Furthermore, the mixture of participants in some respects was not ideal. In spite of tremendous efforts, we did not succeed in reaching many Jewish participants, so that there was a noticeable imbalance with regard to the other religious groups. While we encountered a strong interest on the side of young Muslims who wanted to participate in the seminar, our experiences indicated a strong reserve on the part of young Jews that is related to fears concerning the dialogue with Moslemic youths. A positive aspect of the group mixture, however, was the fact that we were able to reach a wide variety of young Muslims (of Turkish as well as of different Arabic backgrounds), which mirrored the cultural and ethnic diversity within Islam.

Besides the low participation of young Jews, the pedagogical team also found it to be unfortunate that in spite of intense efforts, we were not very successful in reaching Moslemic girls (only one young Palestinian woman with a Christian-Moslemic family background was among the participants). Regardless of this, the strong motivation and commitment of all the female participants – across all the religions and ethnic groups – was impressive in that they helped propel the discussions, thus giving significant impulses to the seminar.

The respectful interaction of the young participants in the „Abrahamic Youth Forum“ was a very encouraging experience, both for the pedagogical team and the participants themselves.

Many of the participants expressed a strong interest that this type of seminar be offered continually. We will now try to acquire funds so that in the coming year a sequel can be offered in Arnoldshain. A nuclear group of this year's seminar will then join the preparation team and will also serve as mediators through which we hope to reach new participants.