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Integration head wants imams to speak German

Deutsche Welle (26.11.2004)/HRWF (06.12.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Germany's integration commissioner wants imams who come to the country from abroad to have a knowledge of German and German society. It's one part of a 20-point strategy for fighting extremism and promoting integration.

Muslim spiritual leaders should serve as "social bridge builders," according to Marieluise Beck, who released her 20 action points in Berlin on Tuesday in the wake of the newly charged debate over the integration of Germany's 3.2 million Muslims.

Beck did not agree with suggestions from some quarters, most prominently by the education minister in Baden-Württemberg, Annette Schavan, that imams should be required to preach in German at mosques. But she did say it would be sensible if before their arrival in Germany, foreign imams received training for work and life in the country, including language lessons and education in German cultural and legal norms.

Many imams who come to Germany from abroad, mostly Turkey, do not speak German and have little if any knowledge about the country or its mores.

Heated discussion

Beck's strategy paper comes at a time when discussion over Muslims' place and integration into German society has heated up following the killing of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh (photo) on Nov. 2 by a Dutch-Moroccan Islamist in the Netherlands and subsequent attacks on mosques and churches in the country. Over the past few weeks, many in Germany have expressed fear that the violence could spread across the border.

A rash of media reports depicting the formation of parallel societies in Muslim enclaves and anti-German preaching being conducted in some mosques sparked both anger and concern over the desire of Germany's Muslims to integrate and the willingness of Germans to accept them.

The strategy paper said that Islamic extremism must be fought with all the powers that the German state has at its disposal, adding that the police and other law enforcement bodies should have the appropriate language and cultural skills. Beck said the distribution of fundamentalist materials, such as printed or spoken word material, in the areas around mosques should be stopped, adding that mosque associations also had responsibilities in this area.

Children at the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Berlin during Islam instruction

Islamic religious education in German should be offered on a voluntary basis by schools, Beck suggested. Many Islam classes in public schools are currently offered only in Turkish, since most of Germany's Muslims are of Turkish origin.

No step backwards

The integration commissioner warned against pushing relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Germany a step back through an integration discussion marked by accusations of intolerance and misunderstanding.

"We run the danger of destroying the progress we've already made in living side by side," she said.

A recent study by the think tank RWI showed that among the children and grandchildren of the first wave of Muslim immigrants to Germany, a sense of pessimism and feelings of exclusion are on the increase. Such developments are alarming, Beck said.

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German state bans hijab from schools

Makka Time (11.11.2004)/HRWF (15.11.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The southern German state of Bavaria has banned women state schoolteachers from wearing Islamic headscarves and other religious insignia in schools.

The ruling conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) said on Thursday that the ban, which has already been introduced in four of Germany's 16 federal states, was designed to protect pupils from the influence of "Islamic fundamentalism".

"The veil is widely abused by Islamic fundamentalist groups as a political symbol," said Bavaria's culture minister Monika Hohlmeier.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens, who rule in a coalition on a national level, voted against the ban in the regional parliament and said it was questionable from a legal point of view.

Headscarf bans for teachers have already been introduced in the states of Hesse, Lower Saxony, Baden-Wuerttemberg and Saarland. In Hesse the ban applies to all civil servants.

'Discrimination'

However, the bans stop short of banning school pupils from wearing Islamic headscarves. Germany is home to more than three million Muslims.

Islamic groups say the headscarf is a religious obligation and not a political statement.

France introduced a ban on state school pupils and teachers wearing headscarves earlier this year, sparking fierce criticism from some Muslim groups that it represents a form of discrimination against Islam.

At least six schoolgirls have been expelled from classes in France for wearing a headscarf since the new law was introduced.

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Low profile for German expert challenging the Koran

by Tom Heneghan

Reuters (11.11.2004)/HRWF (15.11.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - When a Muslim radical murdered the Dutch director Theo van Gogh for a film criticising Islam, Christoph Luxenberg saw his name ripple through Internet forums 1,000 times and immediately knew why.

"The safety of experts on Islam is topical again," he said -- in a surprisingly detached tone for the author of a critique of the Koran who fears it could one day spark similar anger.

Van Gogh, murdered last week for a film slamming Muslim treatment of women, set out to be provocative. But such is the apprehension among critics of Islam that even an obscure German professor of ancient Semitic languages keeps a very low profile.

"Christoph Luxenberg" is a pseudonym. The professor hides his work from his own students -- even those who recommend it to him, not knowing he is its author. He gives interviews by phone and offers little hint of who he really is or where he lives.

This has served Luxenberg well over the past four years, when his book "The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran" was only available in dense academic German. But he doesn't know what to expect when an English translation appears next year.

"I fear a strong reaction in the Islamic world," he told Reuters late on Wednesday by telephone. "My Muslim friends tell me that many people will jump on this book."

The fate of Islamic reformers in the Arab world is sobering.

In the 1990s in Egypt, the writer Faraq Foda was gunned down for criticising fundamentalists and Cairo University professor Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid was forced to divorce his wife and flee abroad for examining the Koran in its historical context.

Luxenberg thinks the academic nature of his work sets him apart from Salman Rushdie, the British writer threatened with death in 1989 by fundamentalists insulted by his novel "The Satanic Verses", which toys with the idea that the Koran is not infallibly divine.

But although he originally thought he could publish under his own name, Muslim friends warned him not to. He said van Gogh's murder "confirms how right they were".

No virgins, no veils?

Luxenberg's book is a linguistic analysis of the Koran that appears arcane -- but could be explosive underneath.

He argues that many words that are hard to understand in the Arabic text actually came from Aramaic, a related tongue widely spoken in the Middle East when the Muslim holy book was written.

His work recalls that of German Biblical scholars of the 19th century, who changed Christians' understanding of their scriptures by uncovering their multi-layered history.

Luxenberg's analysis is strictly linguistic, not theological, but it inevitably ends up questioning some traditions and dogmas that Muslims hold central to their faith.

For example, he says the Koranic passage promising men "virgins" in heaven -- often cited as a supposed incentive for male suicide bombers -- really used a word for "white raisins".

The passage traditionally taken as an instruction to women to wear headscarves actually tells them to wear a belt or an apron around their loins, Luxenberg argues.

Shaking central dogmas

Even more seriously, he shakes a central dogma by saying Mohammad's title as "seal of the prophets", meaning last of the men chosen by God to proclaim his word on earth, actually only means that he confirms what the prophets said.

His thesis that the Koran had Aramaic forerunners, possibly Christian writings, also challenges the tradition that the Koran was dictated in Arabic to Mohammad by the Angel Gabriel and consists of the actual and unchangeable words of God.

"If you challenge that, quite a few things fall apart, so the Muslims don't want to accept this," Luxenberg said, adding that liberal Muslims had encouraged him to continue his work.

"My work does not question the Koran, only the traditional exegesis of the Koran -- what men have read into it."

"I'm not afraid," he continued. "I know what I'm doing is serious and I'm not doing it to destroy Islam. But it would do Islam good if Muslims could discuss it freely. That would help them progress in so many ways."

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Germany's Bavaria bans teachers from wearing religious symbols

Bloomberg (11.11.2004)/HRWF (15.11.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Lawmakers in the southern German state of Bavaria passed a change in the law that will ban teachers in state schools from wearing religious symbols such as Islamic headscarves if they aren't "compatible with western values".

The amendment applies to "symbols and clothing that express religious or ideological beliefs and at the same time can also be understood as an expression of an attitude incompatible with basic constitutional values and educational aims", according to an explanatory note on the law posted by the state government on the Bavarian parliament Web site. "What matters is not the teacher's intention in wearing the item, but the possible interpretation".

Headscarves will not be allowed under the law as some of those who support wearing them regard them as an expression of a lower status for women or of fundamentalism, in contradiction of the constitutional right of equality, the government said.

Bavaria is the third of Germany's 16 states, after Baden-Wuerttemberg and Lower Saxony, to introduce legislation banning Muslim teachers from wearing headscarves in state schools after the Federal Constitutional Court ruled in September 2003 that they can wear such items as state laws don't forbid it.

The debate in Germany about headscarves as religious symbols began when Baden-Wuerttemberg banned Fereshta Ludin, a German of Afghan origin, from working as a teacher in a state school because she wore a scarf.

The state said it violated a requirement that teachers have a neutral attitude toward religion. Ludin fought the decision, arguing that the German constitution guarantees freedom of religious expression.

No ban for nuns

Christian and Jewish symbols and clothing, such as nun's habits, will be excluded from the Bavarian ban, which takes effect Jan. 1. Teachers can wear such items in schools as they reflect the cultural and educational values of the state, the law says.

Legislators in two other states, Hesse and Saarland, have also put forward draft legislation to ban headscarves in their classrooms.

Their proposals and the state laws already in place may be unconstitutional as they contravene the principle of religious equality, lawyers have said.

The state government in Berlin plans to go a step further and has proposed an across-the-board ban on religious symbols for all civil servants and not just for teachers.

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Berlin proposes ban on religious symbols for civil servants

Bloomberg (20.07.2004) / HRWF Int. (22.07.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Berlin's city government put forward a bill banning police, teachers and other civil servants from wearing or displaying religious symbols such as headscarves in public, the city-state's Interior Ministry said.

The legislation balances ``the constitutional rights to freedom of religion and belief that every civil servant enjoys'' with the state's constitutional obligation to neutrality in these areas, the ministry said in a statement on its Web site.

Should the state parliament approves the bill, Berlin would be the first of Germany's 16 states to introduce an across-the-board ban on religious symbols for all civil servants. In April, two other states, Lower Saxony and Baden-Wuerttemberg, passed laws forbidding Muslim teachers from wearing headscarves in publicly run schools.

Legislators in other states, including Hesse, Bavaria and Saarland, have also put forward proposals to ban headscarves in their classrooms. The measures were taken after Germany's Federal Constitutional Court ruled last September that Muslim teachers may wear a headscarf in state schools as long as state laws don't forbid it.

Fereshta Ludin, a German of Afghan origin, took the case to the court after Baden-Wuerttemberg banned her from working as a teacher in a state school because she wore a headscarf. The state argued that she had violated teachers' obligation to neutrality on religion. Ludin argued that the German constitution guarantees freedom of religious expression.

The Berlin state government also proposed changes to its daycare law, the ministry said. Under the proposal, teachers in public kindergartens and day nurseries ``shall pay attention to neutrality of religion and belief.'' While the proposal doesn't seek to ban religious symbols outright, it would force teachers to comply with requests by parents for them to abstain from wearing them.

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Police investigating mosque in Germany

AP (13.07.2004) / HRWF Int. (14.07.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Police on Monday searched computer hard-drives and discs seized from a Moroccan mosque in Frankfurt looking for evidence of violent films, including a beheading, that a young girl said were shown to her and other children to try and incite hatred toward non-Muslims, authorities said.

Some 120 officers raided the Taqwa Mosque's Islamic school on Sunday after the 9-year-old told her public school teacher she and other children were shown violent videos calling for a "holy war against unbelievers," Frankfurt prosecutor's spokeswoman Doris Mueller-Scheu said.

Mosque director Ahmed Ayaou called the raid an insult, and said he did not know who the girl was or what she was talking about.

"This was very surprising — it fell upon us like a blow," he said. "Our association accepts and respects German law. We are well known in Frankfurt, and we live with everyone peacefully."

He criticized police for coming in to the mosque with weapons and not taking their shoes off as they searched the building.

Some 340 Moroccan families attend the mosque, which is located near the city's main train station.

Sifting through the confiscated data, which included 19 computers, could take several weeks, because of the need to translate it from Arabic, Mueller-Scheu said.

Ayaou said the items seized are only "harmless recordings of meetings and events."

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German state outlaws Muslim headscarves

London Times (01.04.2004) / HRWF Int. (07.04.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- A southern German state has today become the first in the country to ban Muslim teachers from wearing Muslim headscarves at school.

The conservative state legislature in Baden-Wuerttemberg voted almost unanimously for the new law, which will come into effect later this month.

Schoolgirls in France were banned from wearing the hijab in February. The ban is due to take effect at the beginning of the next school year in September.

Annette Schavan, the Culture Minister for Baden-Wuerttemberg, said that headscarves were to be banned because they could be interpreted as a symbol of "Islamist political views" which had no place in the classroom.

Germany's highest tribunal, the constitutional court, had ruled in September that Baden-Wuerttemberg was wrong to forbid a Muslim teacher, Fereshta Ludin, from wearing a headscarf in the classroom.

But the court said in its ruling that Germany's 16 regional states could legislate to ban religious apparel if it was deemed to unduly influence children.

As a result, six states have now introduced draft laws banning headscarves or other religious symbols in public institutions.

The latest draft law was published in Berlin earlier this week, when its left-wing government agreed on a sweeping ban on a range of religious symbols.

The Berlin ban would apply to police officers, judges, bailiffs and public school teachers, and would cover Muslim headscarves, large Christian crosses and Jewish skullcaps.

Muslim groups have fiercely criticised the bans as compromising their freedom of religious expression.

The ban on the hijab in French schools was aimed at keeping religion out of the classroom in a state system that jealously guards its secular foundation.

Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the Prime Minister, is also aiming to introduce legislation to restrict Muslim dress and practices in hospitals and other public service buildings.

The French ban did not go uncriticised, however, particularly when it was realised that the original legislation failed to take account of the Sikh religion, which advocates the wearing of turbans.

Critics have argued that the ban would only serve to further alienate the French Muslim community and give a platform to radical Muslim groups, the very groups that the French Government was seeking to counter with the legislation.

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Vatican weighs into German row over religious symbols

by Tony Paterson

Independent (06.01.2004) / HRWF Int. (07.01.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -Email info@hrwf.net -- The Catholic Church strongly attacked the President of Germany yesterday for suggesting that schools should prohibit Christian symbols if they went ahead with plans to ban the wearing of Muslim headscarves in the classroom.

Cardinal Karl Lehmann, the head of the German Bishops' Conference, said Johannes Rau was wrong to equate the "political" headscarf with Christian symbols, which were an established part of German culture.

He told Focus magazine: "Many women consider the headscarf to be a symbol of discrimination but Christian crosses and religious clothing have not the slightest trace of political propaganda about them. These differing symbols cannot be lumped together as missionary garb."

Cardinal Lehmann's remarks, which were sanctioned by the Vatican, are the latest development in a growing row about the wearing of headscarves in German state schools. The dispute mirrors similar controversy in France, where President Jacques Chirac has asked parliament to ban headscarves from the classroom along with overt Christian and Jewish symbols.

In France and, to a lesser extent, in Germany, the moves are seen as an attempt to protect the secular nature of state schools from Muslim fundamentalism. In Germany, teachers' unions and human rights groups are strongly opposed to a headscarf ban. But several of the 16 federal states have said they will implement a ban.

The move follows a decision in September by the country's Constitutional Court, which concluded that it could not implement a national headscarf ban and, instead, ruled that it was up to individual states to legislate.

Mr Rau, a practising Protestant who frequently addresses moral issues, ignited what had hitherto been a low-key debate on the proposed bans at the weekend by insisting that any outlawing of symbols in schools should be applied equally to all religions.

He said in an interview with the Welt am Sonntag newspaper: "If one bans the headscarf in schools as a religious symbol, it is difficult to defend the monk's habit. Our constitution requires equal treatment of all religions in the public sphere."

Cardinal Lehmann's criticism of the German President followed similar remarks by other leading German Roman Catholics. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the head of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, insisted that the Catholic Church would not allow the cross to be banished from schools or other public places.

He said at a New Year's Eve mass in the city of Regensburg: "President Rau has given a very curious lesson. I would not bar a Muslim woman from wearing a headscarf, but even less would I let anyone ban the cross as a public sign of reconciliation."

The controversy deepened at the weekend, with several senior politicians - including Angela Merkel, Germany's opposition Christian Democrat leader, Edmund Stoiber, the Bavarian Prime Minister, and Wolfgang Thierse, the Social Democrat parliamentary president - adding their criticism. Mr Thierse said: "The cross is not a symbol of oppression, but the headscarf can be one for many Muslim women."

Germany, which is home to some 3.5 million Muslims, mostly of Turkish origin, remains divided over the headscarf issue. Two largely Catholic states, Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, have drawn up legislation that would ban teachers from wearing headscarves in schools, although the prohibition would not apply to the display of Christian or Jewish symbols. Several others have said they will follow suit.

But, in its September ruling, Germany's Constitutional Court stipulated that any new laws had to treat all religions equally. German legal experts have warned that attempts to implement a headscarf ban in state schools could provoke a series of protracted court battles, with Muslim complainants arguing that their religion was being discriminated against.

President Rau, who has taken no position on the merits of a ban, appears to have been attempting to encourage states to abide by requirements set out by the Constitutional Court. "I am just saying that the decisions that will now be made should be consistent," he said.

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German chancellor and officials differ on religious symbols in schools

AP (01.01.2004) / HRWF Int. (05.01.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email info@hrwf.net -- Muslim teachers in public schools should be allowed to wear headscarves, a German official responsible for foreigners' integration says.

"It is counterproductive to block such women from training and a career and limit their emancipation," the official, Marieluise Beck, said in an interview Monday with the Financial Times Deutschland newspaper. "It is better to bet on the power of an open society that makes offers to young women and smooths their way into this society."

A week ago, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder took a different position, saying Islamic veils have no place in the classroom.

President Johannes Rau has also weighed into Germany's debate over headscarves. He did not take a specific stand on Muslim veils, but said he supported equal treatment of all religious symbols. Germany has roughly 3.5 million Muslims, mostly of Turkish origin.

Germany has been divided over whether to ban Muslim teachers from wearing headscarves in public classrooms since the nation's highest court ruled in September that veils were allowed unless existing legislation specifically outlawed them.

French President Jacques Chirac's announcement of plans earlier this month to ban all religious symbols from public schools further fueled the discussion.

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Mosque in Germany set on fire

Bernama(WWRN) (25.12.2004) / HRWF Int. (27.12.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> – Email info@hrwf.net -- A newly-constructed mosque in a small town outside Frankfurt was nearly burnt down after a fire attack by unknown perpetrators in the wee hours of Thursday.

The mosque, located in Usingen in the state of Hesse, belonged to the Ahmadiyya sect whose followers have applied for refugee status in Germany on grounds of religious persecution in their native country.

Two days after the attack, the local police are still unable to determine the motives which led the perpetrators to commit the attack.

A spokesperson of the local crime branch of the police, Gaby Goebel told Bernama that the perpetrators had forced their way into the building and set fire to the prayer hall.

The flames had almost entirely destroyed the prayer hall, according to the police, though nobody was injured. Damage caused by the fire is estimated around 50,000 euros.

The spokesperson said there had been traces of a break-in through the toilet window at the rear side of the mosque.

She also said there were indications to confirm that there was a "deliberate" attempt to set fire to the mosque. A carpet may have been set on fire, she said.

Udo Buhler, a crime branch official, told journalists that footprints left behind in the snow had been discovered near the mosque.

The footprints were of only one perpetrator, he said, declining to comment on the motive behind the attack.

According the local police, a motorist who noticed the fire at the mosque called the police at 5.20 am. Fire engines rushed to the scene to extinguish the fire.

Hadayatullah Hubsch, the spokesman of the Ahmadiyya sect in Germany, told journalists in Frankfurt that right-wing elements had carried out the attack. He said that it was "only too logical that it would happen once".

He disclosed that there had been racial slurs made by right-wing elements in recent years against the Ahmadiyyas and it was "no coincidence that the attack had been committed in Usingen".

The Usingen mayor, Matthias Drexelius, a politician belonging to the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), stated that there had been no indications of any conflict over the construction of the mosque.

The coexistence with the Ahmadiyyas, who lived in Usingen since 1999, had been unproblematic.

The mayor said that the local population had been "deeply disturbed" by the incident and one local resident had even spontaneously offered a donation to compensate for the damage.

The Ahmadiyyas constructed their first mosque in 1957 in the north German city of Hamburg. However, Frankfurt has become their most important centre in Germany today.

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