

Germany experiments with training, certifying imams

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As Islamic life and society claims an ever-larger place across Western Europe, imams increasingly are being asked to provide guidance to their immigrant and native-born Muslim congregations.

But that leads to the question: Who provides guidance for the imams? New educational and certification programs in Germany and neighboring Austria hope to be the answer.

It's becoming increasingly clear that imams who are telling their Muslim congregations how to respond and adapt to their new homes were themselves trained and educated far from Europe. Often basic concepts—such as democracy or church-state separation—don't resonate with either Islamic spiritual leaders or their flocks.

A new educational program in the western German town of Osnabrück is a few weeks into an experiment to help imams learn about European society so that they in turn can give better advice to their followers.

A similar program is about to see its first graduates in Vienna, and two other German universities are also working on similar ideas.

Supporters of the German programs eventually want to go beyond filling knowledge gaps on Western society to providing university degrees for would-be imams or Islamic teachers in grade schools.

"There's a deficit here in the area of civic studies," says Rauf Ceylan, a professor of religious studies at the University of Osnabrück who has been instrumental in creating the curriculum. The imams "have really discovered a need here."

In some ways, grafting Islamic education onto the German system is simple. The country has a long tradition of providing religious education in grade schools, and university degrees in religious studies can be a springboard into the clergy or to becoming religious education teachers.

But whereas Germany's Catholic and Lutheran churches have hierarchical structures that allow a central curriculum, Islam has no central decision maker. That's left Ceylan wondering who to pick as a representative for Islam as he develops his imam education program.

"We had to try to find a way to pull the Islamic model in," Ceylan said. "We settled on an advisory council model," which includes members of all major Islamic groups as well as theologians, academics and politicians.

Getting all those groups to agree on one curriculum could prove a challenge, but "it's absolutely possible," said Christine Langenfeld, a law professor at Georg-August University in Göttingen. "The curriculum has to make sure that the different influences of Islamic society are included."

In practical terms, that means different curriculum plans could reflect different theologies within Islam, such as Sunni or Shi'a or Sufi. The various Muslim groups will have to be "flexible," she said. "They can't expect that the curriculum exclusively reflects their beliefs."

Erol Purlu, public affairs director with the Association of Islamic Cultural Centers, said he's confident that the different Muslim groups can eventually agree on a curriculum. "I think we've got a long way ahead of us," Purlu said. "But if we work together, it will happen."

There

are other matters to be worked out, such as salaries and acceptance of the trainees as spiritual leaders. Currently most religious education teachers in German grade schools are professional teachers, with no formal ties to their church.

In addition, even if curriculums can be drafted and the first class of imams can be graduated, some wonder whether Germany's Islamic communities will accept imams trained in Germany rather than in traditional centers of Islamic culture. "These imams will have to fight for acceptance," said Langenfeld.

So far,

Ceylan is optimistic. An extended education program meant for 15 imams was expanded to 30 after 100 attended an informational evening and 50 applied. "We see that the need is there. They are seeking us out," he said. "They don't have these kinds of opportunities in Islamic countries." —RNS