
Foreword

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This fifth volume of the “Wiener Islamic Studies” series is the result of a conference bearing the same title held in Tirana, Albania in October, 2013. The interesting contributions by participants from twenty different countries investigate the intersection of religiosity and citizenship from various religious and cultural perspectives with the main focus centering on the situation of Muslims and citizenship education in Europe. The participants draw attention not only to perceived areas of conflict between Muslim religious identity and practice and Western societies, but also to the ways religion, in particular Islam, can contribute to the promotion of citizenship education.

Understanding citizenship education in secular societies from the perspective of religion poses a challenge to Muslims, particularly to those who are living in Europe and seeking to protect and perpetuate their religious identity within a pluralistic society. Within these societies Muslims are confronted with questions unfamiliar to them based on their histories and backgrounds. It is therefore not always easy for them to understand and respond appropriately. Under these circumstances Muslims feel that they have only one alternative, namely to isolate themselves from society and, within this isolation, to live a life that is artificial and distant from reality.

Such patterns of living, which are observable in many parts of Europe, have inevitably pushed Muslims to the margins of societies. This causes a multitude of problems, particularly for the younger generation, which is not quite sure whether to regard the country where they are living as home or whether to continue to dream of a country where they will ultimately never live and would probably not even aspire to inhabit. Not being able to get situated and settle down, which is a prerequisite for perceiving oneself as an equal citizen, leads many to invent

an overrated and idealized home country that is waiting for them. In this way, many opportunities, which could offer the means for transforming young Muslims into mature, independent and responsible citizens, are disregarded or never realized. The resulting anxiety and doubt causes them to remain within their collective group, which, through its characteristics, creates a barrier to and inhibits a healthy socialization process.

Under these circumstances, religion, which should in fact make life simpler, instead makes daily existence more difficult. Young people are overburdened with contradictions, rendering the process of exploring the means to feel at home in Europe extremely difficult. Consequently, religion blocks rather than facilitates this process. One reason for this blockage is that the media emphasizes the potential for conflict inherent in all religions, rather than their even greater potential to promote peace and understanding.

Fostering open dialogue from within the midst of society constitutes a healthy approach for resolving this dilemma, and religious education could serve as a suitable topic for that dialogue. Islam, like other religions, could contribute toward integrating Muslim children and young adults into their new environment. It could assist in cultivating their self-perception as part of society and in stimulating their developing capacities for assuming responsibilities accordingly, thus diminishing and eventually eliminating their feeling of being strangers in Europe. The religious education of Muslim children and young adults could play a vital role in this regard.

The scholarly contributors to this volume investigate various means to stimulate and facilitate reflection on new social relations while clarifying the contradictions between religious and social affiliation from different perspectives and experiences. They explore hindrances whose removal could enable Muslim children and youth to pursue equal participation in political and social life, and the ways that education could facilitate this process. By focusing specifically on citizenship education, and the place of Islam within it, their research contributes toward the development of an educational project that could enlighten Muslim children and youth regarding their rights and obligations, prepare them to assume civic responsibilities, and make active and conscious participation in social processes more readily accessible to them without relinquishing their faith and religious practice. Thus, this new volume of the "Wiener Islamic Studies" series contributes significantly toward enabling Muslims to develop a new sense of belonging and self-perception in Europe that would strengthen their capacity for social and political participation while simultaneously creating a role and space for their religious identity.

I would hereby like to express my heartfelt thanks to all colleagues whose involvement made this book possible. In addition, it is important to emphasize that this international conference could not have succeeded without the willingness of various agencies and organizations to promote it. In this regard, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Austrian Foreign Ministry, the Austrian Embassy in Tirana and the Austrian Cultural Association for their generous financial support. Furthermore, my thanks also go out to our partner universities, the University of Tirana and Beder University, for their tireless commitment to the management of crucial organizational tasks. To my assistant Minela Salkic-Joldo I am indebted for her significant contributions to the production of this volume. Last but not least, I am sincerely grateful to my colleague Marcia Hermansen of Loyola University Chicago for her role as co-editor of the volume.



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