



## New beginnings? The refugee “crisis,” the “Other,” and Islamic religious education in Germany

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### **Abstract**

The recent influx of refugees has been in the headlines for more than a year in Germany. On a daily basis, new items about refugees, asylum policies, disasters, or xenophobia makes it into print, visual, or social media. Everybody has an opinion about this issue. In this essay, I record some of my own observations in this regard, as someone, who, in different ways, has been involved with refugees and “Others”. I am trying to make some sense of the discourses and actions that the so-called “refugee crisis” has produced. It has become evident that the discourse about the refugees is as much about the “Other” as it is about the “Self”. It is my argument that Germany is at a crossroads as a consequence of the arrival of relatively large numbers of refugees mainly from a Middle Eastern context – it can either lead to Germany closing in on itself, trying to exclude the “Other”, which in a globalized world would probably be a disadvantage; on the other hand, the “refugee crisis” has the potential of a new beginning, expanding on the already existing efforts to integrate “Others” into one’s own society. One example for such integration efforts would be the fairly recent introduction of Islamic Religious Education in state schools. The success or failure of this experiment can provide an indication of the willingness and ability of Germans to find constructive ways to integrate refugees into their communities.

**Key words:** refugee crisis, the other, Islam, Islamic education, Germany

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“Islam doesn’t belong to Germany.” On my way to work one morning in April 2016 I heard reports on the radio that an old debate has flared up yet again. Some right-wing politicians announced that “Islam was against the German Constitution,” that “Islam is a political ideology that is incompatible with the Constitution,” and that while many Muslims belong to Germany, “Islam does not and never will” (<https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/afd-257.html>). On the one hand, I wanted to brush it aside as just another case of those hateful comments that we have heard so often in recent months. On the other hand, I am painfully aware of the danger that lurks beneath such remarks for the future of the whole society. In this essay, I take issue with some of the debates that have marked public discourse in Germany in 2015-16. Many of them are in one way or another linked to “Islam.” I scrutinize some of the main arguments put forward in those debates and argue that what we are able to witness is not just another episode in the construction of the “Other,” but also an exercise in rediscovering an imagined “Self” through a variety of discursive strategies. One such strategy is the dynamics between “hidden” and “public” transcripts in the relationships of power in society. As I will try to show shortly, this balance between what can and cannot be said in public (or in private) about the “Other” (religiously or otherwise defined) has been disturbed as a consequence of the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees<sup>1</sup> in Germany. This “crisis” of “Self,” which Germany as a nation can be said to be going through, has the potential of being the beginning of a new understanding of self-identity that provides room for “Others” in its midst. On the less optimistic side, it has the potential of letting Germans close in on themselves and forcefully exclude “Others.”

This essay is mainly informed by personal experience and is not always academic nor systematic in nature: As a lecturer in Islamic theology/pedagogy (educating future school teachers of Islamic religious education), a subject that is still in its infancy, I am faced on almost daily basis with the debates about the right (or otherwise) of Muslim pupils to receive education in their own religious tradition in state schools in Germany like their Catholic or Protestant fellow pupils.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “refugee” to denote a person, who has fled their country of origin “seeking refuge from war, political oppression, religious persecution, or a natural disaster” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/refugee>). In contrast, I refer to “migrants,” when I mean a person, who “leaves one country to settle permanently in another,” often for economic rather than political reasons (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/migrant>). Unfortunately, this distinction is not always clearly made in public discourse in Germany.

Many of the pupils that my students will teach in the future will have a refugee background. Opposite the university I work at a new facility is being built to house refugees. As I am a fluent speaker of Arabic, I am personally involved in volunteer work with refugees. We rented out a small flat in our house to an Afghan refugee family. My husband is Palestinian (Christian) and has just received a 9 month residence permit. In other words, it is at times difficult for me to keep a distance when it comes to the issues discussed here. I am too personally involved. In this essay, however, I attempt to academically and scientifically come to grips with these issues. It is written in the anthropological tradition of participant observation, my academic home turf. Let me begin with some observations on the “refugee crisis.”

## 1. CRISIS?

The German Ministry for Migration and Refugees reports that in 2015 almost half a million people, mainly from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, asked for asylum in Germany. In 2014, it was about 200,000, and in the first three months of 2016, by the time of writing this paper, refugee numbers had already reached almost 200,000 (BAMF 2016). This was preceded by a period of relatively low numbers of refugees asking for asylum in Germany and paralleled only by the numbers in the early 1990s (*ibid.*). However, as an independent media service on integration reports, these numbers reflect only those who officially applied for asylum; those who arrived in Germany, but have not yet applied for asylum, numbered just above one million in 2015 alone (Mediendienst Integration). Over the past 25 years or so, 3.7 million refugees have come to Germany (BAMF 2016). It must also be noted that no other European country has opened the doors to equal numbers of refugees (*ibid.*).

These figures may seem daunting and to many Germans they are indeed indicators of a deep “crisis.” Put into perspective, however, they must appear manageable: Lebanon, a country of only 4.5 million inhabitants has received just over one million Syrian refugees; Jordan has become home to more than 600,000 refugees with the number of citizens being only 6.5 million; finally, Turkey has received more than 2.7 million Syrian refugees with a population of around 75 million (UNHCR). To bring this numbers game to an end, it must also be noted that the population growth in Germany has been negative for 12 years in a row (between 1999 and 2011), before it began to increase slightly to about 0.5% in 2015 (countrymeters).

A thought imposes itself: Germany *needs* the refugees to stop its negative population growth. This kind of argument and discussion also took place in the early 1990s after the



disintegration of the Soviet Union and the influx of thousands of Soviet “Germans” into Germany. This was also the time when, after about ten years of negative growth rates, the population grew in both numbers and rate (worldometers). Statistics also indicate that the average age of Germans has been increasing from 35 in the 1950s and 60s to 46 in 2015 (ibid.). Looking into the future, it has been forecasted that the proportion of under-20s will fall from 18.1% in 2013 to 16.2% in 2050 (BPD 2015). In the 1950s, this proportion was about one third of the population (ibid.). In parallel to that, the proportion of over-60s has increased from 14.6% in 1950 to 27.1% in 2013 and is forecasted to further increase to 37.6% in 2050 (ibid.). I have my methodological reservations about statistics and am generally sceptical about forecasts, but what these figures indicate is that Germany will be facing problems in the future, not least of which will be financial in nature: who will provide for the millions of pensioners and senior citizens in need of care when the number and percentage of young people and working people is steadily decreasing? This scenario is often employed to show the influx of refugees and migrants into Germany in a positive light. It has been calculated that in order to revert the decrease in the number and percentage of the working population (between 20 and 66 years of age), Germany would need a yearly influx of 470,000 young migrants, i.e. 11 million over the next 25 years (Gillmann 2016). This could also reverse a trend observable in the area of vocational training: the number of young applicants for crafts training has been decreasing notably (Ländermonitor 2015). Some hope that refugees and migrants could fill this gap.

This numbers game can, however, also be turned on its head: instead of seeing refugees and migrants as beneficial for the German economy and society, they are seen as a threat. What used to be expressed behind closed doors or in the pub over a beer (or two), has become a vibrant part of public discourse. While it used to be (and in some circles continues to be) politically incorrect to speak negatively about refugees in public, utterances in this vein seem to have become socially acceptable. We can hear and read of “avalanches” of refugees “overrunning” Germany and the Germans. And while in the past politicians tended to be on the “politically correct” side of the debate, some of them started outing themselves, not only from the far right. The Minister of Finance, for instance, is (mis)quoted as having warned of an “escalation of the refugee crisis” as a result of an “avalanche-like influx of refugees” that could lead to “dramatic distress” for Germany (Tagesschau 2015). Some inflate the numbers in an effort to stir up emotions: the website “Politically Incorrect,” for instance, expects 35 million refugees coming to Germany and quoting the Hungarian foreign minister as observing a “massive migration of peoples with endless reserves” (Politically Incorrect 2015). I could go on infinitely, but I think the message is clear.

How can we explain what is going on at this discursive level? In other minority-majority contexts I have found Scott's (1990) concept of public and hidden transcripts very useful (Droeber 2014). This construct is particularly useful for the analysis of dominant-dominated relationships, but can shed light on less hierarchical social relationships as well. There is no space to go into much detail of the two concepts here. A few landmarks will do. First of all, Scott (1990:18) describes the public transcript as "the *self*-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen." It is a narrative that "is designed to be impressive, to affirm and to naturalize the power of dominant elites" (ibid.). In the case of the refugee "crisis" in Germany, this self-portrait seems to have, for some time at least, been one of "well-meaning, humanitarian minded, philanthropic do-gooder." There are, according to Scott (1990: 18f.), at least four reactions to this elite narrative. One is to publically adopt this discourse, to make use of the "small rhetorical space" that this ideology offers to further one's own interests (Scott 1990:18). The second scenario is the hidden transcript *per se* – a "sharply dissonant political culture," taking place offstage (ibid.). The third strategy is a "politics of disguise and anonymity" in the shape of rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs etc. (Scott 1990:19). The final response is the "rupture of the *cordon sanitaire* between the hidden and the public transcript" (ibid.). This open defiance can lead to "either a swift stroke of repression or, if unanswered, lead[s] to further words and acts of daring" (ibid.).

It appears to me, from my cursory observations of the scene that public discourse on the refugee "crisis" has passed through all of those four reactions in almost chronological order, but also existing simultaneously. While in the first phase of the new "wave" of refugees, when refugee numbers were still small and not big news items, the "welcome culture" appeared to dominate the public transcript. There can be no doubt that at the same time, many hidden transcripts replete with dissonant voices existed. As the numbers of refugees increased, however, this dissenting culture gradually rose to the surface of public discourse and appeared in anonymous rumors, conspiracy theories, or jokes. What we have been able to witness during the course of the last year or two, however, was the fourth response, i.e. an often violent rupture between public and hidden transcripts. The hidden transcripts have exploded into the public domain. Since violent repression is hardly an option in a democratic system, further "acts of daring" were indeed the consequence.

One must not forget, however, that the reactions we have been witnessing during the past couple of years have a pre-history. If we have a cursory look at the developments in criminal statistics, it becomes immediately evident that violence against or hatred of "foreigners" has been increasing steadily over the past 25 years or so. These statistics indicate that the first rupture of



the “cordon sanitaire” between public and hidden transcript in terms of the discourse about “Others” actually happened in 1991, shortly after the unification of the two Germanies and the disintegration of the socialist block. Willems et al. (1994: 99) mentions, based on reports by the Federal Police (BKA), that in the second half of 1991 a significant rise in xenophobic crimes could be observed. While in the previous years there were about 250 such crimes per year, in 1991 police registered 2427 xenophobic crimes (ibid.). The first half of 1991 was similar to the previous years in terms of level of xenophobic attacks (around 50 per month). August then saw a rise to around 100 cases, September to 313, and October to 964 (ibid.). This outbreak was followed by a slight decline until mid-1992, when in September another stark increase was registered to more than 1000 cases per month. In 1992, thus, there were 6336 crimes with a xenophobic background, almost three times the level of the previous year (Willems et al. 1994: 100). Early 1993 again saw a decline until June, when the number of xenophobic crimes skyrocketed to more than 1400 (ibid.). Herbert (2001: 383) provides the figures up to 1998: after peaking in 1993, they continually went down until 1996 (similar level to 1991) before rising again in 1997 and 1998. In 2000, the definition of “xenophobic crimes” was amended to become more encompassing, so a comparison becomes difficult. If we, however, compare the years to which this new definition is applied, a similar trend can be observed: “right-wing” crimes after 2005 continually increase until 2008, then decrease slightly before rising again after 2012 (statista 2016a). Xenophobic crimes have increased steadily between 2010 and 2014 (statista 2016b).

These figures are to be understood with some caution. Definitions and statistics have not been without criticism. I am, however, not so much interested in absolute figures as in trends, which are, to my mind, clearly reflected in these statistics. What these statistics also illustrate quite clearly is one of the issues discussed by Scott (1990): when the hidden transcript bursts into the public domain, it usually happens after a triggering event. These events were, in chronological order, the xenophobic riots in Hoyerswerda in September 1991, similar riots in Rostock in September 1992, and an arson attack on a home for asylum seekers in Solingen in May 1993 (Willems et al. 1994: 99f.). Interestingly enough, and in line with Scott’s analysis, the levels of violence never went back to their pre-attack levels, but stayed relatively high and increased from there.

This is the climate in which expressions like the one mentioned at the beginning – “Islam doesn’t belong to Germany” – are made possible. Views like this were previously confined to hidden transcripts, but have now become part of certain public transcripts. They have become socially acceptable in many situations. We must not, of course, forget that there are a number of different public and hidden transcripts and that the picture is less clear cut than I have outlined

here. In some circles, political correctness continues to determine public discourse. It is, however, also a sign for the validity of Scott's concepts that a German political party (AfD) was able to write xenophobic slogans on its banners and to be consciously politically incorrect with regard to foreigners. In other words, in German public discourse an "Other," who seemingly does not belong to "Us," has again made a strong appearance. Who is this "Other" that is so vividly described in discussions about Germans and Germany, about an imagined "Self?"

## 2. WHO IS THE "OTHER"?

As the expression at the beginning of this essay suggests, Germany's current "Other" are Muslims and Islam. That this has a long history is no secret (see, for instance Said 2001). For centuries, Muslims and Islam have been depicted in political, theological, academic, and popular literature and discourse as "different", "strange", and "other". This history in and of itself is an interesting subject, but shall not be belabored here. Suffice it to note that the current discourse on the "Muslim Other" is yet another wave in what has been a long tradition of marking boundaries around a "Christian" or "enlightened" German "Self". There is, however, at least one problem with this depiction: neither is Germany particularly "Christian" (in terms of religious practice), nor are those who arrive in Germany all Muslims. The majority of the refugees that have come to Germany are from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, i.e. from Muslim majority societies (BAMF 2016). This does, however, not mean that all of them are Muslims, indeed many Christians have fled the extremism of the "Islamic State."

In German public perception, however, the newcomers are exclusively "Muslims." This is not a new phenomenon and does not concern refugees only. As I have argued elsewhere (Droeber 2014), it is particularly members of the Christian minority communities in the Middle East that are suffering from and complaining about this misconception. In their home societies they often feel discriminated against and suppressed to different degrees. Now, many of those who fled the worst oppression under the regime of the "Islamic State," feel that in "Christian" Germany they are also not particularly welcome. In conversations with Christian refugees I have time and again listened to their complaints about how Germans, if not discriminate against them, at least treat Muslims "too friendly" for their liking. Many times I have heard accusations that Germans were too welcoming to Muslims, who they – in similarly broad brush strokes – see as their "oppressors." Instead of the expected Christian solidarity, many Christian refugees find that Germans have sided with their enemies. One Christian refugee once told me, clearly aggravated,



that the volunteers, who look after the refugees once they move out of the camps into other accommodation, brought his Muslim flatmates a Christmas tree, but not for him. Even the label “Muslims” brushes over the diversity within the Muslim community, and Shia refugees, for instance, also often feel overlooked in their religious specificity. They, too, often complain about how Germans treat Sunni Muslims better than them.

This anecdotal evidence indicates that Germans are not very well educated about the political, social, and religious situation in the wider Middle East, where most refugees of the most recent wave come from. Their actions and behaviour must be understood against a background of rather simplistic and dualistic perceptions of the “Muslim world,” or even the so-called “Third World.” Again, this is nothing new. Edward Said (2001) and others have shown that this “strange” world, often called the “Orient,” has often been seen in one of two ways: either as threatening, violent, and generally unpleasant (the ubiquitous image of the “Muslim terrorist”) or as mystical, wonderful, alluring, and mystifying (the “Thousand and One Nights” image). It seems that in the current debates about refugees in Germany, these two perceptions appear in various disguises in the public and hidden transcripts. The political and elite discourse, which has made for most of the public transcript so far, seems to emanate from the “wondrous” image of the Muslim world, producing a quintessential “innocent” refugee, who as a victim had to flee murderous circumstances and must be supported. The hidden transcript, that admittedly is no longer merely “hidden,” appears to be nourished by the threatening image, generating a quintessential “terrorist” refugee, who is perpetrator and intruder.

While these two images are diametrically opposed to each other and engender very different behaviour, they have one thing in common: they discursively create refugees that are fundamentally “other” and usually “below” Germans. The first image renders refugees as poor helpless victims that are dependent on support by Germans. The second image positions them as morally inferior since they are supposedly less enlightened and closer to the animal kingdom than Germans (with violence seen as something more typical for animals). These images are “fed” by such events as the so-called “*tabarrush jama’i*” (collective sexual harassment) that has taken place in several big German cities during the New Year’s celebrations 2016. These two discursive strategies, divergent as they are, serve one particular purpose: portraying the “Self” as morally superior, either as the “Good Samaritan,” who helps the helpless, or as the less animal-like, who has supposedly reached higher evolutionary levels (notwithstanding the fact that the violence that this thinking engenders, as described earlier, is just as animal-like as any other kind of terrorism). In this way most Germans, who have something to say or have taken a certain position within



the refugee-debate, contribute in small or major ways to a discursive construction of German “Selves.”

This phenomenon of “Othering” has long been an issue of debate in social anthropology and other social sciences. One might refer at this point to an anthropological classic, “Ethnic groups and boundaries” by Fredrik Barth (1969), who has turned our attention to the processes involved in maintaining, manipulating, and transgressing (essentially fluid) boundaries between ethnic and other social groups. He explained that “boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them” (Barth 1969: 9). Despite changing participation and membership in such groups, discrete categories are maintained (Barth 1969: 10). In other words, social and ethnic boundaries are so fluid that they threaten social stability and require a discursive framework that constructs such stability. Barth (ibid.) also pointed out that “stable, persisting, and often vitally important social relations are maintained across such boundaries, and are frequently based precisely on the dichotomized ethnic statuses.” I find these remarks particularly useful in trying to understand the processes of marking boundaries and of “Othering” that have been going on in Germany concerning the refugee “crisis” in recent years. In this view it appears that most of the views held by Germans regarding refugees are part and parcel of an exercise of building walls around an “imagined community,” to use Anderson’s (1991) time-honoured expression. That this community is indeed only imagined in a globalised world, where almost everything is in flux appears to be unknown to most Germans. They imagine the German nation as “both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 1991: 6). In this view, refugees, particularly as they have come in noticeable numbers, pull at these limits and boundaries and threaten German sovereignty. What then is to be done with this “Other” that has arrived on the scene so unexpectedly? Without wanting to fall into the trap of generalising and dishing out platitudes, it appears to me that a gut reaction would be to control this “Other.” A variety of ways have been devised to do so: policies to limit the numbers, to control their movement and behaviour, to enforce integration, particularly with regard to language learning, activism and volunteerism to provide refugees with what *we* think they need, talking about them (not with them) in a variety of ways as I have indicated above, and finally violence and hatred to make them go away again.

From an academic perspective we have seen that these strategies serve the purpose of maintaining boundaries between “Us” and “Them.” Most of these strategies are, however, counterproductive when it comes to dealing with the challenges posed by the influx of large numbers of people. As Barth (1969) has pointed out, the flux of people across boundaries is the norm rather than the exception and is usually accommodated within different cultural systems. The sudden arrival of around one million people within the space of a year or so is on a different



plane altogether. Tried and tested strategies will in all likelihood fail. This situation requires a path that has not been trodden before. In other words, this situation bears the potential of opening up new beginnings for Germany. Would a plural or multicultural Germany be such a bad idea?

### 3. INTEGRATING MUSLIMS

Once the basic needs of the refugees have been taken care of and once they are able to stay (even if only temporarily), the main task must be how to integrate them in society. It has become clear that this is a major endeavor, and a difficult one at that. The main hurdle is language. Most refugees arrive without any knowledge of German. Many are also not familiar with other European languages, such as English or French, which would facilitate communication. Many are illiterate, both in their own and in European languages. While many of the adults (particularly males) are keen to work, both the legal framework as well as the language barrier prevents them from finding sources of their own income. There is much to be said on these issues, but this is not the subject of this essay.

Here, I shall focus on the integration of children, which is a somewhat easier task. Children, for reasons of unfinished neurological development, have a much larger potential to pick up a new language. Within a short space of time, once they are admitted to schools and kindergartens, they are able to communicate reasonably well in German. This is not to say that the influx of refugee children does not put enormous pressure on the German educational system, but the integration of children in schools and kindergartens pays indeed. Many of them are quickly able to fully participate in an educational environment.

One aspect of integration has been under discussion in Germany for over ten years: religious plurality in the education system. The number of Muslims in Germany has risen to about four million, due to political reasons: after World War II the German government invited temporary “guest workers” to rebuild the war-torn country. Many of them came from Turkey and while many returned after some years, a good number decided to stay. Apart from refugees from the former Yugoslavia, citizens of Turkish origin form the majority of the Muslim communities in Germany at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their religious affiliation and practice varies greatly, adding to the plurality of the German religious landscape.

The German Constitution grants pupils and their parents the right to receive religious education in governmental schools. It reads: “Parents and guardians shall have the right to decide whether children shall receive religious instruction” (<https://www.gesetze-im->

[internet.de/englisch\\_gg/englisch\\_gg.html#p0040](http://internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html#p0040), 24/5/2016). It further determines that “[r]eligious instruction shall form part of the regular curriculum in state schools” and that “without prejudice to the state’s right of supervision, religious instruction shall be given in accordance with the tenets of the religious community concerned” (ibid.). These tenets have been used to argue for the introduction of Islamic religious education in schools in some federal states (cf. Darwisch 2012: 62ff.). In the federal state of Baden-Wurttemberg, for instance, after long political discussions, a pilot project was initiated in 2006. Teachers were trained to offer Islamic religious education mainly in primary schools. Since 2015 Islamic theology has become a regular subject in teacher training faculties and can be studied as a major subject at the bachelor and master levels. Other federal states have gone into different directions. Some offer religious education for all, beyond denominational boundaries, others have not included Islam in the denominations on offer. I shall focus on the situation in Baden Wurttemberg here, as this is the case I am most familiar with (for experiences in other federal states see Darwisch 2012:83ff.).

It would be wrong to assume that the introduction of Islamic religious education was based on respect and the realization of constitutional rights on the side of the politicians. Representatives of the Muslim religious associations, of which there are many, of course insisted on the constitutional right of Muslim children to receive education in their own religious tradition. The motivation in the political and educational arena, however, was much more practically oriented. The common theme that runs through those debates seems to be one of damage control and prevention. In a conversation about her desire to introduce Islamic religious education in her school, a headmistress told me that during the time slot for Protestant and Catholic religious education, Muslim pupils often hung around the school not knowing what to do with this extra time and being prone to causing trouble. Not every school offers alternatives to religious education, such as moral studies or philosophy, so that pupils have to be supervised during the time of RE lessons. This was not the first time I have heard this line of argument. Muslim pupils should also have somewhere (useful and structured) to go, when the time for RE comes around. Another aspect that is emphasized by many in favor of the introduction of Islamic RE is that, from experience, the parents of Muslim pupils appear to become more interested in participating in school life once their children take part in Islamic RE.

Yet another argument put forward in favor of Islamic RE is the yet unproven assumption that Islamic teaching that is controlled by the state and offered in state schools was an effective tool to prevent the radicalization of Muslim youth. This argument reads as follows: Muslim young people receive religious education in “mosque schools” (if they receive any religious education at all). There is very little control over what is being taught in these schools, not only



are they extremely diverse (different Muslim associations run their own mosques and hence mosque schools), but also the teachers very often come from abroad and teach in languages other than German, most notably Turkish. There appears to be evidence that some radical teaching and preaching takes place in some mosques in Germany (Ceylan 2010). To prevent and counterbalance the assumed radicalization of young Muslims in such mosque schools, the idea seems to have been to offer a controlled religious education for Muslims, in which the content of the curriculum is, while developed in cooperation with Muslim associations, effectively state-controlled.

The pilot phase was concluded successfully and the IRE project moved into a new phase of offering Islamic theology as a major subject at universities. More and more schools turn to the Ministry of Education with requests for IRE teachers. It appears that the idea of offering IRE in state schools fell on fertile ground (after some initial misconceptions and holding back) both on the side of Muslim pupils and their parents as well as policy makers and educators. The as yet unanswered question remains: what can IRE do for the integration of Muslim children and youth into a non-Muslim majority society? There is anecdotal evidence that Muslim pupils and their parents do indeed feel to be taken more seriously once they are offered and able to participate in IRE in their schools. Furthermore, there appears to be evidence that non-Muslim fellow pupils and colleagues become interested in the subject and start asking questions despite initial, often grave reservations about the issue. In other words, the introduction of IRE seems to bring some movement and inter-religious interest into the daily routines in schools and the lives of school populations.

On the didactic and pedagogical level, it must be noted that the curriculum focuses not only on the transmission of religious knowledge and dogma, but also to a large extent on the development of inter-religious competencies, i.e. the capability to enter into a dialogue with non-Muslims. In other words, IRE has a strong potential of becoming an effective tool for the integration of Muslims with non-Muslims in Germany. With some additional effort it also seems to be a good way of alleviating the fears of those who are undecided about how to think and feel about the Muslim “intruders.” Those who are ideologically and violently opposed to the idea of Islam and Muslims being or becoming a part of German society and culture will, however, in all likelihood also remain opposed to the introduction of IRE in the German school curriculum. Whether IRE can also be a tool for the integration of refugee children remains to be seen, since most of those arrived recently do not yet participate in regular classes, but focus on language learning first.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Where do we go from here? I frankly do not know. The recent influx of large numbers of refugees seems to have created a watershed for Germans. The carefully and slowly developed culture of acceptance of difference is still very fragile. Germany has never been an “immigration country” the way the United States or Australia have been and it has taken over forty years for Germans to come to grips with the Muslim/Turkish presence in their midst. The hitherto carefully controlled influx of foreigners into Germany meant that there used to be plenty of time and space to come to terms with an increasing diversity of society. The vastness of the numbers of refugees that suddenly arrived in Germany disturbed that balance and that “organic process” of adapting to “Others”. I have tried to show that on an objective and material level this “disturbance” is relatively easy to manage. The problem arises on an emotional level, on which most of the current debate on refugees in Germany takes place. It is on this level that a “crisis” is created. And it is on this level that imagined “Selves” and imagined “Others” are built that make realistic human(e) relationships increasingly difficult. A discourse that has recently emerged from a “hidden” sphere into the public domain is one of relatively open xenophobia. Indeed, Scott (1990: 203) has observed that it may be a sign that a revolution or “political breakthrough” is afoot. This “breakthrough” would be in the sense of cementing the boundaries between an imagined “Self” and an equally imagined “Other,” as I have tried to show above. History has shown us, where this kind of discourse can lead.

I am, however, carefully optimistic that this kind of hateful discourse and action will not become the dominant climate in Germany. On the one hand, many Germans are fully behind this “welcome culture” as it is often dubbed. This is evident in the large number of volunteers who take care of the refugees and without whose help there would be chaos. I have observed that, while there may some misgivings about the situation, there is also a sense of “pull up your sleeves and get done with it”. Integration of “Others” has become a major issue on the agendas of countless organisations and institutions. Particularly on the level of inter-religious dialogue much is being done everywhere. I have pointed at these efforts by referring to the so far successful experiment of integrating Muslim children through Islamic Religious Education. One must also note that, as in 2016 the numbers of refugees arriving has decreased significantly, the public discourse about them has calmed down somewhat. There is hope that the slogan proposed by Chancellor Angela Merkel “We can do it!” might (yet again) be true.



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