

Sami Adwan
Armin G. Wildfeuer (eds.)

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Participation and Reconciliation

Preconditions of Justice

Schriften der KathO NRW, Band 16

In order to make justice work, participation and reconciliation is needed within and between societies, peoples, and nations. In this compilation, authors—senior academics as well as students—from Bethlehem University, Palestine, and the Catholic University of Applied Sciences, Cologne, Germany, contribute to this important field. Thus, to some extent, the book in itself is an example of the subjects it deals with.



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Sami Adwan – Josef Freise

Palestinian and German Youth with Islamic and Christian Backgrounds: Religion as an Indicator of Behavior. A Comparative Study

Introduction and background

Young people all over the world have similar aspirations and wishes for their future, but the different circumstances of their life, their cultural and religious backgrounds influence their concrete behavior. The research we describe here was aimed at exploring how German and Palestinian youth with Christian and Islamic backgrounds integrate religion in their everyday behavior. The study was part of the teaching in Bethlehem University and the Catholic University in Cologne and part of the exchange project between both universities which was funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst DAAD). Seven German and seven Palestinian students from these universities were involved in this project as field researchers¹. These students interviewed young people in the Bethlehem area and in Cologne area and asked them to what extent religion shapes their day-to-day lives using a focus group approach.

The first step of the project was the discussion of theoretical aspects concerning the youth situation in Germany and in Palestine. This step is not reported here.²

1 The seven German students who took part in this study were Wilma Ehlers, Maria Grace Krause, Simona Liese, Verena Meyburg, Veronika Schmidt, David Clement and Selcuk Celik. The seven Palestinian students are Rita Mumar, Faten Dabash, Maram Ibaidallah, Manar Thaljih, Rawan Abuhanak, Vivian Bahnan and Mira Awad. The results of the study presented in this article are based on their contribution. We are grateful for their commitment to this study. Without their great work the goal of the study could not have been achieved.

2 For further details of the research see: S. Adwan & J. Freise (2008). Religion as an indicator of behavior among Palestinian and German youth with Islamic and Christian backgrounds: a comparative study. In: The influence of education and media on Christian-Muslim Relations. Proceedings of the International Conference held at Bethlehem University in the Holy Land. Palestine October 15-17, 2008, 50-98

1. Research focus and objectives

This research focused on exploring the levels of understanding of Palestinian and German youth groups (Muslims and Christians) of the position of their religions and how that affects their behavior towards their own religion and the other religion.

The research attempted to achieve the following objectives:

- To inquire how the German and Palestinian youths (Christians and Muslims) themselves understand the position of their own religion and how they see the position of the other religions.
- To explore in which way religion is influencing the behaviour (in daily life) of the German and Palestinian (Muslims and Christian) youth groups in the Cologne and Bethlehem areas
- To compare the results of the Christian and Muslim youth groups in Germany and Palestine.
- To draw recommendations and a conclusion in order to develop best-practicemodels for interreligious youth work as steps for creating inter-religious understanding and respects

2. Research questions

A number of open –ended questions were designed to guide the interviews of the focus group sessions and to meet the above-mentioned objectives.

The questions revolved around exploring the levels of understanding among German and Palestinian youth on the position of their religion (Islam and Christianity) in relation to gender relationship, praying, community, religious occasions and feasts, conflict resolution and finally politics and how that influenced their opinions and behaviours towards their own religion and the other religion (see Appendix: Questions of the focus group interviews). These questions were considered as a general guideline in which the interviewers may have had to re-phrase (adjusted) them and change their requests when needed based on the developments of the sessions. Firstly, the questions were devised in English, and were then translated to German and Arabic. To validate the translation, they were translated back to English.

3. Methodology

A descriptive qualitative research approach was followed in this study. The focus-group interview was used to achieve the purposes of this research study.³ The focus-group interview is a structured process for interviewing a small group of individuals, usually between 8-12 (Iowa State University Extension, 2001). It is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment (Ashenfelter & Krueger, 1994). The participants in the focus group usually are brought together to discuss a clearly defined topic and have the possibility to discuss their ideas in depth (Iowa State University Extension, 2001; Kitzinger, 1995).

In this study the purposes of the interviews were to obtain in-depth views and information from the youths themselves regarding the issues addressed. It is argued that in the social and human sciences, focus groups allow interviewers to study people in a more natural setting than a one-to-one interview. The focus-group approach is a particularly useful procedure for exploring levels of understanding of youth and to draw upon their attitudes, feelings, beliefs experiences and reactions, precise issues that may be unknown to the researcher beforehand or may not be feasible in other methods such as observation, one-to-one interviews or in a questionnaire survey. In combination with observing participants, researchers can gain access to various cultural and social groups' settings and raise unexpected issues for exploration (O'Brien, 1993).

Since this study is concerned with exploring attitudes and feelings and to draw out precise issues that may be unknown to the interviewer, the focus group interview was particularly useful in this research (Kitzinger, 1995).

Seven German (Christian and Muslim) students from the Catholic University of Applied Sciences Cologne and seven Palestinian (Christian and Muslims) students from the Faculty of Education at Bethlehem University were selected to conduct and facilitate the focus group interviews after they were trained to do so by the main researchers (authors of this paper). The training included sessions of theoretical background, practical simulation and role play. The focus group interviews took place simultaneously in spring 2008 in the Bethlehem and Cologne areas and each interview lasted about 2 hours.

³ A special thank goes to Dr. Eman Abusada who was the first to introduce the Focus group method in the exchange program between Bethlehem University and the Catholic University of Applied Sciences Cologne.

4. Samples and procedures

A purposful sample of German and Palestinian youth (Christian and Muslim) age 15 to 18 years was selected. Parents' consents were secured before conducting the interviews. All focus group interviews involved between 8- 12 participants in each.

The research teams in both countries announced their goals and the purposes of the study to the organizations and schools and to the selected youth. Then they explained the nature of the research and arranged a time and terms of reference to conduct the sessions.

The rights of the youths were strictly maintained and protected throughout the research, the use of the data; privacy and confidentiality of the information was strictly observed. Before the interviews started, the youth were given the chance to either participate or refuse to participate in this research. Participation in the focus group sessions was completely voluntary.

The German sample and background on the organizations:

- This study deals with Christian and Muslim youths in Germany who belong to different social backgrounds in the Cologne area. For the purpose of this research, secondary schools of both a high and a low educational standard, a group of Christian altar servers and a social organization were contacted. It was planned to interview Christian and Muslim groups of youths with higher and lower education levels. Therefore, the organizations were chosen to present these variations.
- The interviewers who are students in social work and social education in the Catholic University of Applied Sciences – initiated the contacts with the organizations for their approval and to select the youths aged 15-18 years who showed willingness to participate and whom they thought would meet the criteria of this research. Many youths showed an interest in participating in the study. Among them only 34 youth were selected: 18 Christians (12 females and 6 males) and 16 Muslims (9 females and 7 males).

The Palestinian sample and background:

- The Palestinian Christian and Muslim samples were from the Bethlehem and Jerusalem areas and were selected from the public, UNRWA and private schools. The majority of the Christian samples were selected from the cities only since a very limited number of Christians live in villages and refugee camps in these areas. They included males/females and from different denominations: Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Assyrian and Lutheran.

- The Muslim samples were selected from cities, villages and refugee camps (Dehaisha, Aydeh and Azzah camps) that are located in Bethlehem area and included males and females. Most Muslims in Palestine in general and in Bethlehem and Jerusalem in specific follow the Shafiee Doctrine⁴ in worshipping. Sixty three Muslim and Christian youth were selected: among them 31 Christians (16 females and 15 males) and 32 Muslims (19 males and 13 females).

5. Limitations of the study

The aim of this study was to collect in-depth information from Christian and Muslim youth about topics of interest. Therefore the aim was to get a varied sample of German and Palestinian Christian and Muslim youths who belong to different backgrounds. Although there are variations in the sample, the sample is not meant to be representative, and it is not perceived in that way. Therefore, a broad generalization of the results of a larger population of Christian and Muslim youths in Germany and/or in Palestine was not intended and is not possible in this study. The researchers could not include a Jewish youth sample for political and logistical reasons.

The field researchers in Palestine documented the discussions in writing only because youth groups refused to be videoed or audiotaped during the interviews but they agreed to be photographed. In Germany three of the four group sessions were audiotaped, but some of the German youngsters did not like to be photographed. Due to limited time and resources some parts of the group discussion (like warming up) were not transcribed and only those parts of the discussions that were directly linked to the research topics were transcribed. The interview questions were based only on the issues of gender relationship, prayer, community, religious occasions / feasts, religion and conflict resolution and politics. Some questions were seen differently in each country or in each religion and had to be asked or explained in different ways like the meaning of gender relationship.

Though the study could be the basis for a larger study of youth, it could still stand as it is as a qualitative study of young people within the specific organizations in Cologne and the specific schools in the Bethlehem areas in

4 Shafi' School: The four schools (or Madh'hab) of Sunni Islam are each named by students of the classical jurist who taught them. The Sunni schools are Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'I and Hanbali. The overwhelming of Palestinian follow the Shafi' school in worshipping but the Islamic courts follow Al-Hanafi school (Al-Jabari, 2009) and since Palestine was under the Jordanian rule Al-Hanafi school also, followed in Palestinian Islamic courts (Ayiah & Asaf, 2002).

which different groups of youth from those organizations and schools were studied.

In order to get more in depth information and to increase validity and reliability of the study, it is always recommended to hold as many sessions as possible of focus groups.

6. The results of the research

The research teams in Cologne and in Bethlehem transcribed all interviews immediately afterwards. Each research team which consisted of 2 students, a facilitator and observer, met and coded the transcribed interviews, then a list of categories were developed based on the guided research questions (Mays & Pope: 1995). Several meetings were held among all the groups to compare and contrast the categories and as a result a number of concepts were agreed upon to represent all categorised data. They were derived from the interviews.

The German and Palestinian research teams presented, exchanged, compared and discussed their results with each other in two workshops; each lasting one week. The first workshop was organized in Bethlehem University in June 2008 and the second workshop was organized in October 2008 in the Catholic University in Cologne.

In the process of analysis and interpretation we discussed the results of every single focus group with the German and the Palestinian students who undertook the group interviews. This had been done separately in the Palestinian and the German contexts and was done together during our exchange meetings in Bethlehem (June 2008) and Cologne (October 2008). Here we can only report on some key points of the discussion.

6.1 Gender relationship

We found out that there are different meanings of the concept “relationship” among German and Palestinian youth. On the Palestinian side it could also mean sexual relations and not only friendship while on the German side it contains both meanings.

The Palestinian youth regardless of their religion see that relationship between genders should be based on respect and friendship and sexual relationship is not allowed at all before marriage. But, this relationship could develop to a relationship of love that later on leads to engagement and marriage. It is much easier for Palestinian Christians to go out together before an engagement than for Muslims. In some cases, Palestinian Muslim females could not or are not allowed even to speak with even some of their relatives. The Ger-

man Christian sample did not exclude sexual relations but it is not linked with religion any more while the Muslim German sample seems to exclude sex in younger age groups but it is possible later at the age of marriage though without intercourse.

Marriage is the aim of all Muslim youth in Germany and in Palestine and it is important to Christian youth. Both Muslim groups in Germany and Palestine mentioned that their future wives should be virgins while virginity was not mentioned by the other groups. The Palestinian Muslim sample added that their future wives should be beautiful, well-educated, open-minded and clever while Palestinian Christians said that they should be of high morality, loving, generous and educated.

Homosexuality is forbidden in any situation and it is not acceptable at all by all Palestinian (Muslim and Christian) samples as it is against God's will and even German Muslims oppose it. Though some of them accept it, if it is not in their families. The German Christian sample sees homosexuality as a controversial issue and it seems that young females accept it more than males in this age.

Both Muslims in Germany and Palestine agree with the position of their religion that divorce is permissible in certain circumstances and the Palestinian Greek Orthodox sample have the same position while according to Catholics in Palestine and Germany divorce is forbidden and only separation is allowed.

6.2 Prayer

In general and across the samples, some of the youth pray while others pray occasionally and the rest do not. But praying is seen differently in both societies because the German society is described as a secularized society where there is separation between religion and the state while Palestinian society is described as a religious society and there is no separation between religion and the state.

Praying according to Islam is the most important pillar of Islam and youth consider it as a duty and very important. The German Muslim sample feel if they do not pray they might get in trouble with Allah and through praying they can get a place in Heaven, while the Palestinian Muslim sample feels that praying helps them to become united with Allah's presence and it gives them inner comfort and security and is a kind of physical exercise for the body.

A Palestinian Muslim sample from villages and refugee camps shows a greater interest in praying than youth from the cities. But praying is seen by youth in villages as more a family and community matter while in the cities it

is seen as more of a personal matter. Male Palestinian Muslims seem to be more devoted to praying than females.

The Palestinian Christian sample stated that their religion encourages them to pray but never obliges them to do so. They see religion more about morality rather than about praying. Most Catholics go to mass on Sundays and some pray daily but others seldom. Those who pray said that they pray when they like to talk with God and they feel comfortable when they pray but others said that “praying says nothing to me”. Those who pray from the German Christian youth are in the minority and for them praying is an individual choice. They pray alone and in communes and they pray when there is a need and when they feel that praying is good for them.

6.3 Community and feast

It seems that the Palestinian and the German samples do not know much about each other's religious feasts and a very limited number of them have participated in each other's religious feasts, either because they do not have a link with people from the other religion or because they live in a monoculture town. Many of these were not invited before or they do not know how to behave and act at the feasts of the other religion or because they do not like or accept what happens at such feasts; like drinking or too much drinking at the Christian feasts as seen by a Muslim sample. Christians and Muslims in Palestine know about each other's religion more than in Germany. The majority of the sample however would like to participate in the other's religion feasts in the future if they are invited.

There is a notion among some of the samples that they feel much more comfortable and they benefit from living or working only in a community of their own religion. Many reasons behind this notion were mentioned by the samples: for example, Palestinian Christian sample said it is because: Christianity is a religion of love and forgiveness and not a religion of killing and fighting. We have the same thoughts; some Muslim men harass Christian women. Palestinian and German Muslim samples said they feel more comfortable in a community of their religion because they have the same customs and habits and because of drinking in Christian community.

on the one hand, more prejudices exist among the Palestinian samples toward other religions than among the German samples and on the other hand prejudices among the Palestinian samples from Jerusalem are more than the samples from Bethlehem in general either because they do not know much about the other religion or that there is some kind of stigma or for political reasons resulting from the Israeli occupation. Palestinians in Bethlehem in general are more united on their national identity than those in Jerusalem. For example, some of the Palestinian Christian samples view Islam as a religion

of deceit, killing and fighting and Muslims do not respect women. A minority of the Christian samples from Jerusalem is willing to accept Muslims but others with limits. At the same time, most of the Palestinian Muslim sample respect Christianity as a divine religion but others do not because they claim that some Christians do not accept Islam or because they consider Jesus as God or the Son of God.

6.4 Religion and conflict resolution

Concerning the issue of religion and conflict resolution young German Muslims acknowledged that some of them sometimes used violence in their groups in peer conflicts, but they know that this is forbidden by their religion. They see the use of violence as an element of transition. When they get older, they become more reasonable and do not use violence any more.

One of the questions was whether you ever criticized your own religion or the religion of others. Most of the German Muslims said that they do not criticize Islam, because Islam is perfect. Some of the Muslims criticized Christianity, because Christians changed the Holy Scriptures.

The Christians in Germany criticized their own religion, but they also criticized Islam. Some of the less educated Christian youngsters felt threatened by the “strong groups of Muslims”. The better educated young people referred to the building of a representative mosque in Cologne, and there was some confusion concerning Islam as a religion and political Islamist movements.

Muslim males from the city and refugee camps in Bethlehem did not criticize the principles of their religion but they criticized the people who wrongly practise and apply them. Islamic rules respect women and the Muslims should respect women in the same way. All females and males in the Bethlehem district agreed that “they never criticized their religion because it is perfect”. But one of the girls from the refugee camp was criticized because she doesn’t wear a head scarf and she regretted it.

Most Christian students agreed that “there is a freedom in Christianity”, and their religion is being criticized by them. Few of them said that “they criticize their own religion, but not in front of Muslims”.

Most of the Muslim sample (females and the males) in Jerusalem said that “they have criticized their religion in the past”. Christian students were divided into two equal groups. The first said that “they never criticized their religion, and that they were satisfied with it”. The second group said they “criticized the story of Adam and Eve, the priests, and the various sects in Christianity but never criticized their religion in terms of faith”.

Most Muslims (males and females) said that they have criticized Christianity in the past. They said that “they criticized Christianity because it doesn’t allow religious men to get married and they considered that a strange rule”.

Both females and males criticized the freedom that existed in Christianity regarding women’s clothes, drinking wine and the attitude toward Muslims. They also criticized Christianity because it says that “Jesus is the Son of God and that He was crucified while Muslims believe that Allah rescued him and took Him to Heaven”. A few of them did not criticize Christianity because everyone has the choice and is free to choose his religion.

The majority of Christian students said yes, they criticized Islam, and they gave examples concerning personal experiences like: “They accuse Christians of being atheists”. On the other hand some students were against this and said that “Islam is a religion that has its own beliefs and no one has the right to criticize it.”

Most Muslims are satisfied with the role of their religion in conflict resolution. They agreed that Islam solves conflicts and fights among people in a fair, logical, rational and a positive way. They also said that “Islam always calls for peace” and they stated that the “Prophet Muhammad ordered Muslims to avoid conflict and fighting among themselves”.

Moreover, they said that “Islam forbids killing people of other religions” but they stated that “Islam orders Muslims to fight people who are fighting them and their religion”.

In conclusion we can say that there is a need for better understanding concerning conflict issues between Christians and Muslims in Germany as well as in Palestine, but in different aspects: In Germany the Muslim minority sometimes feels identified with an extremist political Islamist movement, and indeed some young Christians are confusing Islam as a religion with Islamic fundamentalism.

In Palestine we saw a difference between the groups interviewed in Jerusalem and in the West Bank. In the West Bank there were some critical remarks concerning customs in Islam; in Jerusalem we felt more tensions and conflicts between young Christians and Muslims.

We need more interreligious education as preventative work against enemy-images. We need to teach that the other religion is different, but not bad, and we have to speak about the different interpretations of religion.

6.5 Religion and politics

Concerning the issue of religion and politics, young people were asked what is the role of religion in relation to war, peace, justice, environment and if they were satisfied with the way Islam and Christianity dealt with political issues.

The Muslims interviewed in Germany said that they learn about politics in school. The more educated Muslims asked for a better understanding of Islam in school and in society. They asked for religious education in school which does not yet exist. The Muslims interviewed – all of them had a Turkish background – followed Turkish politics on television, and even more than German politics. This is something interesting, as most of them were born in Germany and sometimes even their parents were born in Germany, but they still feel strongly connected with Turkey as their mother-country.

The less educated young German Christians said that religion has nothing to do with politics and religion and should be kept out of the field of politics. The Christians interviewed with more education had a different opinion. They asked the churches to do more for human rights and peace in the world. But for both groups the issue of politics was not very important in the interviews.

The Muslims in Palestine said that politics has an important role in Islam. War is forbidden in Islam, but it is a must, if people of other religions fight Muslims. Islam is seen as the religion of justice. Many of the interviewed Muslims were not satisfied with the way the other religion deals with political issues.

The Christians in Palestine see how politics affects Christians: There is a limit placed on the building of churches and Christian schools; they are forbidden to go to Jerusalem to pray by the Israelis. They criticize their own world-wide community: “Christians forgot to defend their land and Christians have to prove that they care about Christians in Palestine.”

Most of the Christians are not convinced with the way Islam deals with political issues (“since they fight with stones and martyrs”).

In conclusion we can say that Christians see Christianity as a religion of peace and Muslims see Islam as a religion of peace.

We discovered that Christianity is identified with Bush the former US president by some Muslims and Islam is identified with Bin Laden by some Christians. This makes the demand for a better political education which distinguishes between true religion and the false and manipulated use of religion seem necessary.

7. Recommendations as a conclusion

In their search for faith and in their prayer life, young Christians are often on their own. Churches as well as Christian communities and organizations are called on to make youth religious education appropriate to their age and cultural background which helps them to get introduced to spirituality, faith, praying and to celebrate faith itself. Here it is important to mention that many

communities and groups are trying to present such offers but that there is big competition in this big market of leisure time offers, partly commercial ones.

Muslim youth are deeply rooted in groups that are orientated in religious ways. The non-Muslim observers notice a high orientation regarding obligations (e.g. “You must be religious in order to secure your place in heaven.”). At the same time the less educated Muslims do not seem to have differentiated religious knowledge. The reason for this could be found in poor religious education and in missed religious classes.

It can only be speculated about the quality of the respective Koran classes attended, since concrete findings about these classes are not available.

The more educated Muslim group is poorly informed about the missing Christian freedom of religion in Turkey. Surely the Turkish media have something to do with this. For young Muslims it is necessary to offer academically based and government controlled religious classes.

Sometimes it was alarming which reservations and prejudices were communicated during the research, especially by the Christian youths. Other research confirmed the same results for Muslim youths. They are turning away from local young people and their Christian orientation partly because they have experienced discrimination. Therefore there is an urgent need for young Christian and Muslims to encounter each other in an educationally supervised and organized environment. Such meetings could help to reduce prejudices, to perceive differences not as a threat but as an asset and to discover a common ground. There is also a need for youth to know more about their own religion and others. This could be done by preparing pedagogical religious material and teaching it to youth of both religions together. This recommendation was suggested as well by Giacaman and Mustafa (2006: 12) in their book when they said “The need to improve and develop these educational materials and to make changes in order to adapt them to the Palestinian curriculum”.

Finally, there is an urgent need to clarify the positions of religions for youth and to invite them to participate in each other’s religious feasts and to train current and future teachers and social workers on how to deal with their students and clients of different religions.

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