

Today's Zaman, 18 August 2010, Commentary

Teaching Religion

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Generally five different approaches are proposed when the teaching of religion in public schools is being discussed worldwide:

1) The dominant religion of the country should be taught to all students; 2) This lesson should not be obligatory but elective; 3) Not a specific religion, but information about religions in general should be taught in conjunction with ethics; 4) Each religious group should learn its own dogma separately and with its own instructors; 5) Religion should not be taught in public schools and whoever wants may engage in private study. There are many variations on these views. For example, some put conditions on cases in which students will be exempt from these lessons and sometimes the language to be used in these lessons also comes forward as a controversial issue.

I noticed an interesting similarity when I studied Turkish and Greek textbooks on religion. Actually, the likeness goes beyond the textbooks and has to do with a social practice. On one hand, modern positive principles are voiced, such as being objective and taking equal distance vis-à-vis all religions and beliefs, avoiding propaganda, etc., while on the other hand there is a systematic effort to teach the dominant belief of the majority, an approach of proselytization. But this contradiction is not surprising. In another article I had written, "A paradox is intrinsic in the (personal) notion of equality between beliefs since belief is related to what one believes as being the truth and it is not possible to view what is true and what is wrong (or less true) on equal terms; one esteems his/her belief irrespective of intentions." It is natural for the writers of religious textbooks to produce texts that they sincerely believe correspond to what is true and

useful for their students.

The end result is that groups following “a different belief” are annoyed. Limiting my views to my experience in Turkey and with what I gathered in related academic meetings I have attended, I conclude that the “others” who comprise the groups beyond the majority believe that their children are facing unwanted religious propaganda. Conversely, the advocates of this education have set their consciences at ease: They believe that they propagate what they see as true and useful. In short, we experience an absolute lack of empathy. Some are content to spread what they think is proper and the others complain. A second negative phenomenon is the authoritarian power relations here: The majority ignores the minority. Technically, this situation is known as violation of human rights.

The textbooks presently used contain information about the other “different” religions, but in each case through “our” perspective. It is understandable that the authors who believe in the validity of their views are unable to pinpoint the shortcomings of their textbooks and the criticisms they will receive. Even if they appreciated the complaints, they would still perceive their work as useful. A critical presentation of these textbooks would require another article. Here I will limit myself to noting that the notion of “different” (in Turkish “farklı,” as opposed to “Muslim”) religions is problematic. Why are the beliefs of Alevis, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, atheists seen as “different” (diverse, special) and not also the belief of the majority? All beliefs are different with respect to each other. If all beliefs but the belief of the majority (which is taught in public schools) are perceived as “different,” a “normal” and “standard” religion is being indirectly recognized. Isn't this approach technically a discriminatory approach?

So often the secular character of the state and its need to be at equal distance from all beliefs is recalled. It is, however, not possible and maybe even unnecessary to be at an equal distance from all beliefs on a personal level. We are not “distanced” from our own religion. What can be secured is the objectivity of the state itself. Respect for all religions is constantly voiced, but this does not mean that each will not recognize its own beliefs as best. Actually, real respect for the beliefs of the “other” starts with the recognition of the relativity of our belief. But this is asking too much from believers. Absolute respect cannot be secured on a personal base. Individuals cannot accept, for example the possibility of being in the wrong equally with the “other” believers. Such a philosophical expectation is not fair, either. Everyone should be left in peace with what they believe. An expectation of a relativist approach in such matters is both unrealistic and an unsafe approach to social peace.

On the other hand, the “equal distance” that cannot be totally secured on the individual basis, the missing objectivity, can be accomplished at the level of the state and state schools. What is

difficult for the individual, e.g., empathy, may not be so for the schools, since the state, principles, rules and laws can operate independently of our personal feelings, provided society and its politicians see the need for such an approach. This specific step may also be the topic of a future article.

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