

Summary

Most textbooks that are currently used in schools across Europe still portray Islam in a simplistic way, thereby maintaining the image of Muslims as a (primarily) religiously defined monolithic group that represents the ‚others‘ from outside Europe. These are the results of a recent study carried out by the Georg Eckert Institute of International Textbook Research in Brunswick.¹ Most of the history and politics textbooks examined from Germany, Austria, France, Spain and England construct or reinforce notions of ‚one single Islam‘ and ‚one single modern Europe‘ that are homogeneous and mutually exclusive entities, that have therefore nothing in common, and whose relationship is characterised by conflict and confrontations.

This simplistic view is due to a lack of differentiation between Islam as a religious outlook and way of life on the one hand, and Islam as cultural and political practices performed by Muslims on the other. Depictions of Muslims in school textbooks are therefore dominated by images that stress religiously marked differences and the existence of exclusivist, collective identities. Particularly frequent is the assessment of Islam as an outdated system of ancient rules and regulations that, somewhat anachronistically, still dominates the lives of Muslim people. However, a lack of differentiation and an overuse of collective identifications might lead to a sense of ‚cultural racism‘ that takes religious differences to be invariable.

The study states that most of the detected polarisations between Islam and Europe were actually not found in presentations of Muslims as religious opponents in violent conflicts, e.g. through texts about the crusades, but in their portrayals as pre-modern ‚others‘ who do, thus, not fit into a modern Europe. Even well-minded historical narratives that acknowledge the achievements of Islam’s ‚Golden Age‘ in medieval times in fact do not question this dichotomised picture of Islam and Europe but rather reinforce the notion that Muslim societies have experienced ever since cultural stagnation and have fallen behind a progressive and developing European culture.

¹ The study was carried out by Susanne Kröhnert-Othman, Melanie Kamp and Constantin Wagner between July and December 2010 at the Georg Eckert Institute of International Textbook Research, Brunswick.