

European Voluntary Service and Intercultural Competence in Understanding Islamic Culture



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Abstract: Culture cannot be reduced to religion even though religion is an important aspect of it. However, exceptionally, religion most usually is the first thing to come to the mind when Middle-Eastern societies are at stake. In a sense, the culture of all Middle-Eastern societies, including Turkey, is equated with Islam –a world religion currently echoing with “oppression” and “terrorism”. This paper explores what kinds of perceptions European young people have regarding religious life in Turkey. Additionally and more importantly, the paper questions if European youth’s perceptions of religious life in Turkish society get significantly changed after living in this society for about a year.

The data for this paper comes from a qualitative/ethnographic research conducted to examine major effects of European Voluntary Service Program. Prior to the voluntary service, more or less a similar line of thinking on Islam is expected to be found among European young volunteers while a diversity of perceptions is anticipated to be arising from an experience of living in Turkey, a finding that would partially confirm the literature.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, Islamophobia, European Voluntary Service, young people, Islam, Turkey

Avrupa Gönüllü Hizmeti ve İslami Kültürün Anlaşılması Bağlamında Kültürlerarası Yetkinlik

Özet: Önemli bir parçası olsa da, kültür salt dine indirgenemez. Bu gerçeğe rağmen, Orta Doğu toplumları söz konusu olduğunda genellikle din akla gelen ilk şeydir. Bir anlamda, Türkiye dâhil, tüm Orta Doğulu toplumların kültürü İslam ile eşitlenir ki, bu özellikle son dönemlerde sıklıkla “baskı” ve “terörizm” ile birlikte anılan bir dünya dininin adıdır. Bu makale Avrupalı gençlerin Türkiye’deki dinsel yaşama ilişkin ne tür algılamalara sahip olduklarını sorgulayacaktır. İlâveten ve daha önemli olarak, makale, Avrupalı gençlerin Türk toplumundaki dinsel yaşama ilişkin algılamalarının bu toplumda yaklaşık bir yıl yaşadktan sonra anlamlı derecede değişime uğrayıp uğramadığını sorgulayacaktır.

Araştırma verileri, Avrupa Gönüllü Hizmet (AGH) Programı’nın temel etkilerini incelemek üzere geliştirilen daha geniş bir nitel/etnografik araştırmadan alınmıştır. AGH deneyimi öncesinde, İslamofobik bir düşünme biçiminin AGH gönüllüleri arasında da yaygın olması öngörülmüştür. Türkiye’deki AGH deneyimleri sonrasında ise farklı türlerde algılamaların ortaya çıkacağı ve bunun ilgili literatürü kısmen doğrulayacağı beklenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kültürlerarası yetkinlik, İslamofobi, Avrupa Gönüllü Hizmeti, gençler, İslam, Türkiye

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Introduction

Theoretical and empirical research on intercultural competence is expanding itself from very different angles and in very different fields. This paper will be focused on Islamophobia with the assumption that it is a concrete area to discuss and explore possible effects of intercultural contact and dialogue. In doing so, young people's experiences of international voluntary service will be used as the main source of data. The intention here is not to offer a new theoretical model; rather it is to discuss a particular question: Can international mobility programs (European Voluntary Service Program, for instance) as an instrument of intercultural competence also be an effective means for reducing Islamophobia? The discussion begins with a brief overview of the concepts of intercultural competence, Islamophobia, and European Voluntary Service Program (EVS). Then, after the descriptions of methodological issues, the findings are described in six main points.

Conceptual Framework

Intercultural Dialogue and Competence

The process of "intercultural learning" and its implied goal "intercultural competence" have recently become a central topic of discussion. The vastly expanding literature on intercultural competence uses a range of terms more or less relating to the same thing: "intercultural competence" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247), "global competence" (Hunter, 2006, p. 270), "intercultural effectiveness" (Stone, 2006, p. 338), "intercultural literacy" (Heyward, 2002, p. 10) etc.. Each term offers different definitions based on different theoretical approaches. Deardorff, for example, defines Intercultural competence as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). Furthermore it is also defined as "acquiring increased awareness of subjective cultural context (world view), including one's own, and developing greater ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of exchange" (Bennett, 2009, p. 2). It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine differing definitions and theoretical models of this

concept. However, it is necessary to state that elaborations of this concept usually see it as “a dynamic, on-going, interactive self-reflective learning process” (Freeman et al., 2009, p. 13). This learning process is about both “the self” and “the other”. It requires, for many scholars, significant transformations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the individual in his/her relation to the other (Heywood, 2002, p. 10; Hunter, 2006, p. 270; Treleavan et al., 2007, p. 9).

The fundamental principle of intercultural learning and competence is to be engaged in dialogue with the other (Crichton et al., 2004, p. 4; Hunfeld, 1997, p. 3). Intercultural dialogue relies on listening and the ability to hear the voice of the “other”. It is, however, more than just verbal communication between individuals, groups, organizations and communities from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is an interactive process that goes beyond a mere “tolerance of the other”; it is “also an ethos, an attitude and a journey”. The aim of intercultural dialogue is to develop “a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices; to increase participation and the freedom and ability to make choices; to foster equality; and to enhance creative processes” (ERICarts, 2008, p. 12).

The literature reveals many discussions on what components this concept has, how it is gained, how it is measured, whom it targets, etc¹. However, one particularly important discussion is about the goal of intercultural competence. Why is it necessary? For what purpose it should be gained?

The need for intercultural dialogue/learning/competence is usually emphasized as a requirement of new working conditions in the globalized world. Indeed, some scholars tend to introduce the goal of intercultural competence as a key to more productivity, efficiency and success in work and/or educational environments. Some others introduce it as key to personal development and communicative efficiency (Rathje, 2007, p. 256-257). The common feature of such approaches is to see intercultural competence as something that concerns mainly the individual.

However, intercultural competence is also important from socio-political dimensions² and concerns not only individuals but communities in multi-

1 For a review of such discussions in the German-Speaking world, see Rathje, 2007.

2 Deardorff (2006) acknowledges that definitions of Intercultural competence reflect mainly western perspectives. It can be added that it is mostly based on western experiences and concerns too.

cultural societies as well. This is because it takes place in a *context* and because cultural misunderstandings, stereotypes, and even conflicts/tensions are becoming difficult problems in contemporary world. This is true for most of societies but especially vital for contemporary Europe where such problems are observable in the form of Islamophobia.

Islamophobia in Europe

Muslims in Europe are estimated at a population of at least 15 million in Western Europe, to a total of 50 million in the whole Europe. Western Europe is hosting Muslim immigrant populations for more than half a century³. So, Europe is supposed to get used to Muslim culture and to establish relatively peaceful relations with it. On the contrary, Islamophobia is getting increased day by day especially since September 11th, 2001. Almost all controversies regarding Islam and Muslims in Europe turn out to become Europe's demands on Islam and Muslims, instead of becoming motivations to understand Islamic culture⁴.

Definitions of Islamophobia characterize it as “the fear and/or hatred of Islam, Muslims or Islamic culture” (Al-Hassani, 2005, p. 3), “an irrational distrust, fear or rejection of the Muslim religion and those who are (perceived as) Muslim” (van Driel, 2004, cited in Gardner at al 2008, p. 3), “a modern and secular anti-Islamic discourse and practice appearing in the public sphere with the integration of Muslim immigrant communities and intensifying after 9/11 (Cesari, 2006, cited in Gardner at al 2008, p. 3). A report by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia gives a long list of how Islamophobia is manifested in public spheres. (Hugh Muir and Laura Smith, 2004, p. 7-8). According to The Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) Islamophobia “may manifest itself in different guises, in particular through negative general attitudes but also

3 It is interesting to note that Muslims in Europe are almost always referred as “Islamic community” as if they were one single community without their particularities including ethnic and national cultures. No other religion in Europe is referred in this manner.

4 For example, the controversy of headscarf in France turned out to be a demand of laicism and, therefore, a matter of French identity rather than a motivation to understand what Islamic identity is.

to varying degrees, through discriminatory acts and through violence and harassment” (EUMC 2006, p. 60).

In an Islamophobic atmosphere, Islam has been identified as being the essential alien other in a negative relation to a European identity (Clarke, 2006, p. 79). People under the influence of Islamophobia come to think that, ‘they’ (Muslims) are so different that they are evil, wicked, cruel, irrational, disloyal, devious and uncivilized. In short, they do not belong to Europe and should be removed from Europe. These strongly negative views of the other are accompanied by totally positive views of the self. ‘We’ are just the opposite of what they are – good, wise, kind, reasonable, loyal, honest and civilized (Hugh Muir and Laura Smith, 2004, p. 11).

Islamophobia encourages people to think that either Muslims should be kicked out or Islam should be Europeanized. Islam is seen either as compatibles with European values or as incompatible with them. As Clarke notes, this creates “a characterization of Muslims as either ‘moderates’ or ‘radicals and fundamentalists’” (Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Of course ‘radicals’ will be suppressed while ‘moderates’ are supported.

Indeed all those lines of thinking are absolvable even in the official documents of the Council of Europe. A report prepared by Mogens Jensen (2010) on behalf of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education indentifies 7 main reasons for why Islamophobia is at rise:

1. Terrorist attacks of radical Islamist groups are creating it.
2. Media presents Islam in negative images. It does this especially over Muslim women.
3. Far-right wing parties exploit this issue and make anti-Islamic propaganda.
4. People lack adequate info on Islam.
5. The attitude of some Muslims who associate with Islam some cultural and patriarchal practices which have nothing to do with the traditional Islamic teaching and which are contrary to the laws of European democracies: the so-called “honour killings”, genital mutilation or the full veiling of women (the burqa and the niqab).
6. Failure of Muslims to integrate in their host countries.
7. Islam itself: Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington have developed the thesis that there is an irreconcilable clash between Islam and ‘the West’.

Thus, it is either Muslims, or media, or far-right wing parties or Islam itself that is responsible and should be blamed for the rise of Islamophobia. In a sense, the victim itself is largely blamed for the rise of Islamophobia in Europe. All those so-called reasons are open to discussion. Is it really only right-wing parties or media that advocate a negative view of Muslims? What about liberal, left-wing politicians and intellectuals? Do they have nothing to do with the rise of Islamophobia? On the other hand, it can be claimed that viewing Islam and the West in clash is an essentialist, ahistorical approach that basically denies dynamic nature of cultures. Such an approach clearly tends to see members of communities as the prisoners of their cultures. Furthermore, what does failure of Muslims to integrate mean? Is not the language of *integration* in fact equivalent to a desire of assimilation? Does not it mean: ‘they should become like us’? Are there really common European norms and values to be integrated to? All those questions are legitimate questions reflecting many different directions of answers that will not be touched on here. However, those questions are worthy of mentioning to make the point that social and political foundations of Islamophobia are rarely questioned.

In order to overcome inter-community tensions generated by Islamophobia, thus, the dominant view suggests that;

- Muslims should separate themselves from radical Islamist groups and discourses. They should reinterpret Islam in a way compatible with core European norms and values. This will facilitate the integration of Muslim communities into their host countries.
- Inter-religious education should be supported by member states, in order to raise public awareness of the common origin and values of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and their impact on modern European humanism.
- Contacts between Muslim as well as non-Muslim Europeans and Muslims in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia should be facilitated, in particular among young people, students and teachers (Jenson, 2010, p. 16-17).

These ideas indicate that lack of adequate info on Islam in both sides of Muslims and Europeans is a key source of the problem. Therefore, as a solution, actions should be undertaken and special programs should be run to promote intercultural contacts. The logic behind this is that intercultural contact will eventually lead to better understanding of the other and therefore

will serve for lowering tensions between members of different cultures.

European Voluntary Service (EVS) Program of the European Commission was created as one of such actions and programs for this end. It is believed that this program will serve to the aim of combating Islamophobia as well as other types of xenophobia in Europe.

European Voluntary Service (EVS)

Voluntary work can be defined as “work undertaken not for financial gain, of one’s own free will, benefiting a third party and performed in an organizational setting” (PPMI, 2009, p. 85). International volunteering is understood as voluntary activities performed outside the volunteer’s country of residence. The primary concept of international voluntary service is intercultural dialogue and learning, bringing together people from different social and cultural backgrounds.

People volunteer for many different reasons. For young people the main benefits are “mainly human capital and social capital as they tend to return as more mature, autonomous, resourceful and sociable individuals. The non-formal training they undergo makes them more likely to be mobile later in life and to benefit from the single European labour market” (Gal at al. 2003, p. 26-27; PPMI, 2009, p. 59).

EVS is a kind of international voluntary work. It was created in 1996 and has been financed by the European Commission. It is run under the program called “Youth in Action”. Thus, it is part of European Youth policy aiming at intercultural dialogue and competence among European youth. Those young people who are between 18 and 30 years old are eligible to benefit from this opportunity. The length of EVS may take from 2 weeks up to 12 months.

Turkey has been involved in EVS sub-program of Youth in Action Program of the EC since 2004. Since then Turkey sent 2330 young volunteers to European countries while she hosted a total of 593 European volunteers during the 2004-2011 period.

Research Question and Methodology

The belief that “contact between cultures would automatically lead to intercultural learning and to the development of positive attitudes towards the other culture” has already been rejected and criticized by many (O’Dowd, 2003, p. 118). Instead of integration between different ethnic groups, “a trend towards ghettoization has been observed, with interaction taking place within rather than across national groups” (Brown, 2009, p. 242). But most of such works were carried out to examine experiences of non-westerners in western countries. Work on non-western countries hosting western people is relatively fewer. As Brown points out “research into the attitudes and perceptions of the European student community towards the international classroom is now needed” (Brown, 2009, p. 255). Thus it is reasonable to think that examining experiences of European youth in an Islamic culture (Turkey) might be interesting and it may provide somehow a different picture.

Does intercultural contact (in this case EVS experiences) lead to intercultural competence and affect Islamophobic attitudes among young people? More specifically, do European youth’s perceptions of religious life in Turkish society get significantly changed after living in this society for about a year? The paper will explore those specific questions in order to discuss if international mobility programs (EVS Program, for instance) as an instrument of intercultural competence can be an effective means also for reducing Islamophobia.

Since this is a part of a larger ethnographic research aiming to explore the effects of EVS experiences on young people who volunteered in Balıkesir, Turkey, the major data comes from interviews carried out with them in 2010. The data, therefore, was gathered through in-depth interviews based on open-ended questions. All replies were recorded, transcribed and coded. The names of the informants were changed for the purpose of anonymity.

A snowball/purposeful sampling method was used. The informants were selected among those who volunteered in Turkey at least 6 months or longer. They were also selected among those who volunteered in two main organizations:

1.GESOGED (Gençlik Sosyal Gelişim Derneği): 22 volunteers.

2.INOBALUN (International Office at Balıkesir University): 8 volunteers.

Those two organizations are the major organizations involved in EVS projects in Balıkesir since 2005.

The sample is consisted of 30 volunteers coming from Germany (6), France (6), Spain (3), Hungary (2), Latvia (3), Belgium (2), Greece (1), Austria (1), Italy (1), Lithuania (1), Denmark (1), Finland (1), Check Republic (1), and Ukraine (1). Thus, the number of volunteers from Germany and France is clearly higher than the volunteers from all other countries.

The literature on voluntary work emphasizes that girls rather than boys are more willing to do EVS. Indeed, in this particular research too, the girls are the greater majority (26 girls and 4 boys). Moreover, the majority of the volunteers (18 volunteers) are between 21-23 years old whereas only 5 volunteers are between 18-20 years old and only 7 volunteers are 24 or older. Finally, in terms of level of education, the majority (23 volunteers) hold university degrees while only 7 of them hold a high school degree.

Key Findings

The findings can be summarized in 6 main points which are described below.

Previous perceptions. Almost all of the volunteers and their significant others held negative images and concerns about Turkey and Turkish culture before they came to Turkey for EVS. Those images included the followings:

- Turkey is an undeveloped country with uneducated, poor, backward, closed-minded people.
- Turkish people are too religious and have strong Islamic beliefs which shape all aspects of daily life in Turkey.
- The perception and practice of Islam is the same with other Muslim countries.
- Turkish women wear headscarf with the force of their family members.

- Turkish women are subordinated by men and need to be emancipated.
- Turkey is not a safe place for a long stay.

Perceptions changed. EVS experiences seriously changed all those images of Turkey and Turkish culture. EVS volunteers discovered that;

- Turkey is a modern and developed country that is very similar to Europe. This similarity concerns both socio-economic and cultural outlook. The following quotations illustrate this view:

“Before coming to Turkey I used to hear that Turkey is an undeveloped country with conservatively-minded people. In order to construct my own view I chose Turkey for my EVS project and afterwards I realized that you can see in Turkey whatever you see in Europe: democracy, freedom, and a dynamic economy” (Marie).

“Turkey is a European country more than most of European countries” (Boris).

“After my trip to Syria I returned back to Turkey and from that moment I felt at home, that is in Europe” (Laura).

- A great majority of Turkish people are hardworking, educated, open-minded people with a decent level of life standards. However, it is not the same in all regions of the country. There are significant differences in terms of developmental level between east and west parts of the country. What follow are some expressions of those views shared by almost all of the volunteers:

“I used to think that most of Turkish people are uneducated, close-minded, and too religious. But after living here for one year I realized that most of them are well educated and hardworking people” (Guna).

“During my EVS project I got the chance of travelling all over the country. I can say that the eastern and western parts of Turkey are like two different countries in terms of both economic and cultural structures” (Estefany).

- Turkey possesses a diversity of cultures with different levels of relationship with religion. Some people are quite religious while others are moderately religious and still some others are not religious at all. This is expressed by a volunteer in an interesting way:

“Before I came to Turkey I expected to see a crazy picture of religion and culture. For example I thought all women wear headscarf and everybody observe Ramadan month by fasting. I also expected to see all Turkish men with moustache and long beard. More importantly I thought there would be no room for different views and life styles in an Islamic country. But the reality is not like that. Here you would be amazed with the diversity of views

and lifestyles. You can easily observe this by taking a five-minute walk on streets” (Francesco).

“Another volunteer informs that she “got to know many women with headscarf but at the same time many women without it; many people fasting in Ramadan but many others not fasting; many people going for Friday prayer but many others not doing it.” She, furthermore, says that she was “still surprised to see this much diversity despite the fact that she knew Turkey was a secular country, not a theocratic one” (Beatris).

- There is a peaceful relationship among Turkish people no matter what their religious attitudes are. As one volunteer says:

“Of course people here too hold different political views but in terms of religious attitudes I never saw a hateful relationship; friendships and social interactions are based on honesty, respect and altruism, not on religiosity. In fact, you can see, for example, both types of women with and without headscarf as best friends” (Santa).

- Islamic beliefs are only one of the factors affecting the daily lives of Turks. Traditions, social class and status, nationalism and westernization are also important factors in the lives of Turkish people. A volunteer studied sociology expresses this view in a quite reasonable way:

“When we talk about Islamic world, we as Europeans sometimes forget the fact that Muslims too are humans, like us, subject to not only religious identity but also other dimensions of social life such as social class, popular culture, and nationalism. My EVS experience in Turkey taught me that Turks love talking about religion but also about national and international politics, social problems, etc.” (Beatris).

- Family ties are very crucial for Turks. This point is emphasized by all volunteers without exception. This characteristic of Turkish society is greatly admired by all volunteers.

- Turkish people are proud of their nationality, history and culture.

Perceptions on Turkish women. Despite EVS experiences, there are differing views of Turkish women among EVS volunteers:

- Some still hold the view that Turkish women are subordinated and need to be emancipated. For holders of this view, “it is difficult to be a woman in Turkey” (Christiane). One of the volunteers admits her ethnocentric orientation and adds that “it is not possible to criticize a culture without being ethnocentric”. For her, “some things in Turkey especially being a woman are not acceptable. Culture cannot be a justification for gender inequality

in Turkey” (Sophie).

- Some others, on the other hand, think that Turkish women are treated equally and are not so much different than European women. Those holding this view say to discover that;
- Women with headscarf wear it not because of enforcement of family members but because of their own free choice.
- Women with headscarf, especially young ones, are trying to get empowered with higher educational degrees and careers and they want to take active role in social life.
- There is no conflict or aggressive attitudes between women with headscarf and those without it. On the contrary, they have peaceful relationships with each other.

The following quotation reflects those views in a striking way:

“For instance, I used to think that Turkish women have no role in social life, that they were wearing headscarf with the enforcement of their fathers or husbands. This is still the dominant view in western media. However, I have a difference. I lived in this country, among those people. I now know that Turkish women are very active in social and even political life. They are not so much different from European women. Women with and without headscarf are able to live together in peace. What is interesting for me is that especially young women wear headscarf completely on their own wills and that they even tend to fight for it against strict state policies as well as in some cases even against their own parents” (Edit).

No xenophobia in Turkish society. All volunteers agree that there is no place for xenophobia in Turkish society. On the contrary, Turkish people are very friendly and hospital towards foreigners. They also enjoy very much being and interacting with foreigners. One volunteer says in this regard:

“I discovered the importance of a rich history and culture, and that of flag and national values here among Turks. I also noticed very quickly that it is not so much important whether you are a local or foreign person here. While xenophobia is getting increased in Europe, people here are quite interested in meeting and interacting with foreigners and they are very helpful and hospital towards people from other countries. For many weeks I found this very strange because people in my country are usually too cold and suspicious towards foreigners” (Tiina).

Similarly another volunteer says that “it takes only 5 minutes to be a friend with Turks. In my country this would require at least months, even years” (Joke). Many others emphasize Turkish hospitality: “Now I closely know that the famous Turkish hospitality is not a myth” (Sophie). Many expressions like those indicate that the volunteers had no problems in integrating with local people and that they experienced no ghettoization while in Turkey. This is clearly a finding contradicting with the findings of many other researches (Brown, 2009; O’Dowd, 2003).

A different Islam. After EVS experiences almost all volunteers came to think that Islam in Turkey is quite different than the rest of the world. They now think that;

- There is a more peaceful and warmer Islam in Turkey.
- Islam is not too much restrictive in this country.

The following quotation exemplifies those views very clearly:

“Another stereotype I had was that all believers of Islam no matter where they live are the same. But now I know that Turkish Islam is different. Here you see a more peaceful and loving Islam. Furthermore, I noticed here that Islam is not restrictive as much as I thought it was” (Guna).

One should pay attention to the fact that volunteers still have negative images of Islam (violent, hateful, and restrictive) in other parts of Muslim world. What changes is only the image of Islam in Turkey.

Readings and discussions on Islam. EVS experiences provided plenty of chances for most volunteers to read on and discuss with local people about Islam. Some central issues in those readings and discussions are democracy, human rights, gender equality, holy war (jihad), and freedom of expression. Those readings and discussions, the volunteers admit, made them to recognize the diversity of views among Turkish people. The opinions of the volunteers themselves on the relationships of Islam with those issues seems to be varying too:

- Few volunteers hold the view that Islamic belief system is not compatible with European norms and values because, they believe, “Islamic principles like Jihad (holy war, men’s superiority over women, obedience to the authority etc. are controversial with western notions of equality, freedom, and democracy” (Sophie).
- Many volunteers came to think that it is possible and in fact very common among (Turkish) Muslims to interpret and perceive Islam in a way compatible with European norms and values. In this regard, one particular volunteer makes a remarkable observation:

“I met hundreds of Turks here. All kinds of them. I have to say that they love to talk about politics and religion. At the beginning I used to join their conversations with a heavy tone of criticism. I was always using terms like freedom, equality, science, reason etc. against them. But in a while I realized that they embrace those concepts even more than I do. What is interesting for me is that they very often do that in relation to their Holy Book” (Edit).

Another volunteer just confirms this by saying:

“After interacting with them, I no longer think that values like freedom, democracy, secularism, social justice, human rights etc. are unique to Europe. I know think that all those values are the common products of the whole humanity, including that of Muslims.”

- Thus, few volunteers keep holding the view that there is no room for Turkey to be a member state in the European Union while some others came to think otherwise.

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings indicate that EVS experiences, for *most* of volunteers, led significant changes in their perceptions of religion and religious life in Turkey. At least two conclusions can be drawn from this. First, EVS experiences clearly provide a better understanding of culture and religious life in Turkish society. Thus, the EVS program deserves more support from national governments as well as from the European Commission. Second, Turkey (at least the city of Balıkesir) is an intercultural-competence-friendly environment. Considering the fact that not all societies/cultures are equally intercultural-competence-friendly environments⁵, it is fair to consider the

⁵ Brown (2009), for instance illustrates how British campus life is based on ghettoization of international students, instead of integration and intercultural communication.

concept of intercultural competence as something that is based not only on the capacity of individuals but also on that of societies/cultures.

Thus, the first conclusion implies that adequate information *does* matter at least for ordinary people. Intercultural contact and dialogue may in fact be a powerful means for promoting cultural diversity. The opportunity to interact at the grassroots level is crucial to developing a better understanding of, a peaceful relationship with and to dismissing fear of the “other”.

But despite this positive effect, some important questions still remain: is information enough for overcoming Islamophobic discourses and attitudes that are in rise in Europe today? Did, in fact, Europe fight against anti-Semitism by gaining more information on the religious beliefs and practices of Jewish communities? Does Islamophobia really exist today because of lack of adequate information on Islam? Or because it is fabricated and needed for the justification of new colonial intentions and actions by European states⁶?

If the source of Islamophobia is seen at the grassroots level, then obviously promoting intercultural contact and dialogue can be very helpful. However, based on international affairs during at least the last decade (in the 2000's), it is equally reasonable to argue that the most influential source of Islamophobia is somewhere else, in the new international concerns and plans, for instance, of the ruling powers of the West. If this is the case, then the role of intercultural contact and dialogue for overcoming Islamophobia would be really questionable. Furthermore, if that is the case, then the whole meaning of intercultural competence to be developed in Islamic environments would be reduced only to a *key for success* for *individuals* struggling to maximize their chances in globally competitive capitalist markets.

Limits of the Study

The study certainly reflects several limitations. First, the size and method of sampling is not suitable for broad generalizations. Second, the study is

⁶ Islamophobia creates a mission of wars for the West to “save the Muslim world” from despotic leaders oppressing Muslim women and men who do not possess capability for liberation. Through this mission the West brings “freedom and democracy” and takes some other things (oil e.g.) in return.

based only on the *perceptions* of EVS volunteers, not on their *behaviors*. Third, the study reflects only one side of the issue that is how *European* youth perceive religious culture in Turkey. The other side would be studying how *Turkish* youth perceive religious culture in Europe. Such a study may give researchers a chance of comparison, which is a necessary further step to better comprehend the state of intercultural competence among the youth regarding religious cultures and communities in Europe. Finally, although cross-cultural studies are important in generating new data and insights, it should be stressed that they should be supported along with historical analyses also, a quality that this particular study suffers from its deficiency.

GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET**Avrupa Gönüllü Hizmeti ve İslami Kültürün Anlaşılması****Bağlamında Kültürlerarası Yetkinlik****Fahri Çakı***

“Kişinin kültürlerarası bilgi, beceri ve tutumlarına bağlı olarak çok kültürlü durumlarda etkili ve uygun bir şekilde iletişim yeteneği” olarak tanımlanan “kültürlerarası yetkinlik” kavramı bilim insanları ve uygulayıcılar arasında son birkaç on-yıldır büyük ilgi görmüştür. “Öteki”nin kültürüne karşı derinlemesine bir anlayış, hoşgörü ve saygı içeren kültürlerarası yetkinliğin geliştirilmesinde genellikle kültürlerarası temasın önemli bir rol oynadığı varsayılır. Önemli bir parçası olsa da, kültür salt dine indirgenemez. Bu gerçeğe rağmen, Orta Doğu toplumları söz konusu olduğunda genellikle din akla gelen ilk şeydir. Bir anlamda, Türkiye dâhil, tüm Orta Doğulu toplumların kültürü İslam ile eşitlenir ki, bu özellikle son dönemlerde sıklıkla “baskı” ve “terörizm” ile birlikte anılan bir dünya dininin adıdır. Bu tür bir algılamanın Avrupalı gençler arasında da muhtemelen yaygın olduğu varsayılabilir. Bu varsayımı test etmek için bu makale Avrupalı gençlerin Türkiye’deki dinsel yaşama ilişkin ne tür algılamalara sahip olduklarını sorgulamaktadır. İlaveten ve daha önemli olarak, makale, Avrupalı gençlerin Türk toplumundaki dinsel yaşama ilişkin algılamalarının bu toplumda yaklaşık bir yıl yaşadıkdan sonra anlamlı derecede değişime uğrayıp uğramadığını incelemektedir. Bu tür bir incelemenin kültürlerarası temasın kültürlerarası yetkinlik üzerindeki etkileri hakkında önemli kavrayışlara izin vermesi umulmaktadır.

Kavramsal Çerçeve

Üç merkezi kavram üzerinde durulmuştur. İlk olarak, *kültürlerarası yetkinlik* kavramı üzerine bazı tanımlamalar ve tartışmalar sunulmuştur. Kültürlerarası yetkinliğin temel ilkesinin öteki ile diyalog içine girmek olduğu vurgulanmıştır. Kültürlerarası yetkinliğin amacı bağlamında iki ana

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yaklaşımına yer verilmiştir: Bir yaklaşım kültürlerarası yetkinliğin amacını iş ve/veya eğitim ortamlarında daha fazla üretkenlik, verimlilik ve başarı için anahtar olarak görürken; diğer bir yaklaşım onu kişisel gelişim ve iletişimsel yeterlilik için anahtar olarak sunmaktadır. Her iki yaklaşımın ortak bir özelliği kültürlerarası yetkinliği temelde bireyi ilgilendiren bir şey olarak görmeleridir. Oysa kültürlerarası yetkinliğin sosyo-politik boyutlar bakımından da önem taşıdığı ve sadece bireyleri değil, aynı zamanda çok-kültürlü toplumlarda cemaatleri de ilgilendirdiği fikri savunulmuştur.

İkinci olarak, kültürlerarası yetkinliğin somut bir alanı olarak *İslamofobi* kavramı tartışılmıştır. İslamofobinin önemli bir niteliğinin, Avrupa kimliğiyle olumsuz bir ilişki içinde İslam'ı özsül-yabancı öteki olarak belirlemesi olduğu savunulmuştur. Takiben, İslamofobinin niçin yükselişte olduğuna ilişkin yaygın görüşler incelenmiştir. İnceleme göstermiştir ki, yaygın görüşler Müslümanları, medyayı, aşırı sağcı partileri veya İslam'ın bizzat kendisini İslamofobinin yükselmesinin temel sorumlusu olarak görmekte ve ayıplamaktadırlar. Tüm bu sözde nedenlerin tartışmaya açık olduğu ileri sürülmüştür.

Hem Müslümanlar hem Avrupalılar tarafında İslam'a ilişkin doğru bilgilerden yoksunluğun problemin temel bir kaynağı olduğu fikri, çözüm olarak, kültürlerarası yetkinliği desteklemek için özel eylemlere gidilmesi ve özel programlar uygulanması düşüncesini doğurmaktadır. Avrupa Komisyonu'nun *Avrupa Gönüllü Hizmet (AGH) Programı* bu amaç doğrultusunda bu tür eylemlerin ve programların bir türü olarak oluşturulduğu için üçüncü merkezi kavram olarak AGH hakkında genel bilgiler sunulmuştur.

Yöntem

Yukarıda zikredilen üç kavrama dayalı olarak araştırma sorusu şu şekilde formül edilmiştir: kültürlerarası temas (bu araştırmada, AGH deneyimleri) kültürlerarası yetkinliğe yol açmakta ve gençler arasındaki İslamofobik tutumları etkilemekte midir?

Araştırma verileri, AGH Programı'nın temel etkilerini incelemek üzere geliştirilen daha geniş bir nitel/etnografik araştırmadan alınmıştır. Amaçlı/kartopu örnekleme yöntemine dayalı örneklem, 2005-2010 yılları arasında

Balıkesir’de iki temel kuruluşta yaklaşık bir yıl süreyle gönüllü hizmette bulunmuş 30 AGH gönüllüsünden oluşmaktadır. Araştırmada açık-uçlu sorulardan oluşan yarı-yapılandırılmış bir derinlemesine mülakat formu kullanılmıştır. Tüm yanıtlar kaydedilmiş, çözümlenmiş, ve kodlanmıştır. İletmenlerin isimleri gizlilik maksadıyla değiştirilmiştir.

AGH deneyimi öncesinde, İslamofobik bir düşünme biçiminin AGH gönüllüleri arasında da yaygın olması öngörülmüştür. Türkiye’deki AGH deneyimleri sonrasında ise farklı türlerde algılamaların ortaya çıkacağı ve bunun ilgili literatürü kısmen doğrulayacağı düşünülmüştür.

Bulgular

Araştırma bulguları altı temel noktada formüle edilmiştir: 1) Hemen hemen tüm gönüllüler ve yakınları AGH için Türkiye’ye gelmeden önce Türkiye ve Türk kültürü hakkında olumsuz imgelere ve endişelere sahip olmuştur. 2) AGH deneyimleri Türkiye ve Türk kültürü hakkındaki bu olumsuz imge ve endişelerin ciddi derecede değişime uğramasını sağlamıştır. 3) AGH deneyimlerinden kaynaklanan bu olumlu değişimlere rağmen AGH gönüllüleri arasında Türk kadınına ilişkin düşünce farklılıkları devam etmektedir. 4) Tüm gönüllüler Türk toplumunda yabancı-düşmanlığına yer olmadığı, aksine Türk insanının yabancılara karşı dostane ve misafirperver olduğu hususunda hemfikirdirler. 5) AGH deneyimleri sonrasında neredeyse tüm gönüllüler Türkiye’deki İslam’ın diğer yerlerdekinden farklı olarak daha barışçıl ve sıcak olduğunu, çok fazla sınırlayıcı olmadığını düşünmeye başlamışlardır. 6) AGH deneyimleri gönüllülere İslam hakkında okuma ve yerel halkla tartışma olanakları vermiştir ki bu sayede gönüllüler Türk halkı içerisindeki düşünce farklılıklarının yoğunluğunu fark edebilmişlerdir.

Sonuç

Bu bulgular ışığında iki sonuca ulaşılmıştır. Birincisi, AGH deneyimlerinin Türk toplumunda dinsel kültür ve yaşama ilişkin daha isabetli bir anlayış geliştirilmesini sağladığı ve bu nedenle AGH programının hükümetler ve Avrupa Komisyonu tarafından daha fazla desteklenmeyi hak ettiğiidir. İkinci-

cisi, Türkiye'nin (en azından Balıkesir'in) kültürlerarası yetkinlik-dostu bir çevre olduğudur. Bu özelliğin her toplumda eş-değer düzeyde bulunmadığı dikkate alınarak, kültürlerarası yetkinlik kavramının salt bireylerin kapasitesine dayanmadığı aynı zamanda toplumların ve kültürlerin de kapasitesine dayanan bir kavram olduğu çıkarılması elde edilmiştir.

Birinci sonuçtan hareketle, İslamofobik tutum ve düşünceler açısından, uygun ve yeterli bilginin ortalama insanlar için fark yaratabildiği vurgulanmış ve bu olumlu etkiye rağmen bazı önemli sorular (örneğin, İslamofobinin gerçekten uygun ve yeterli bilgi eksikliğinden dolayı mı yoksa Avrupalı güçlerin yeni sömürgeci niyet ve eylemlerini meşrulaştırmak için mi var olduğu) daha fazla tartışmaya açık bırakılmıştır.

Araştırmanın sınırlılıkları bağlamında dört temel nokta ifade edilmiştir. Birincisi, örneklem büyüklüğü ve metodu büyük genellemeler yapmaya uygun değildir. İkincisi, araştırma AGH gönüllülerinin sadece *algılarına* dayanmaktadır, onların *davranışlarına* değil. Üçüncüsü, araştırma konunun sadece bir tarafını yani *Avrupalı* gençlerin Türkiye'deki dinsel kültürü nasıl algıladıklarını yansıtmaktadır. Konunun diğer tarafı, *Türk* gençlerinin Avrupa'daki dinsel kültürü nasıl algıladıklarını araştırmak olabilir. Son olarak, yeni veriler ve anlayışlar yaratması bakımından kültürler arası araştırmalar önemli olsalar da bu tür araştırmaların tarihsel analizlerle de desteklenmesi gereği vardır ki, bu araştırma bu açıdan yoksun sayılmalıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kültürlerarası yetkinlik, İslamofobi, Avrupa Gönüllü Hizmeti, gençler, İslam, Türkiye

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