Hessian culture minister calls for creationism to be discussed in German schools

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In an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) at the end of June, the Hessian culture minister, Karin Wolff, a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), called for the integration of the biblical version of creation into "modern biology instruction." According to Wolff, sciences such as biology had to recognise their limitations and a debate over the biblical account of creation in biology lessons offered the chance for a "new coming together of natural science and religion."

Wolff's comments came as a response to a report by the culture committee of the Council of Europe, "The dangers of creationism in education," which pointed to a deliberate campaign by religious and right-wing political forces to encourage the teaching of creationism in European schools. The Council's resolution warned that creationist theories aimed to replace "democracy with a theocracy," and called upon European nations to restrict discussion over creationism to the teaching of religious studies. The report was rejected by a majority of the European Council, dominated by conservative parties.

In a recent article on the controversy, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* also criticised the resolution drawn up by the European culture committee for being too uncritical of science and referred in defence of its argument to Germany's most prominent philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, who published a collection of essays two years ago calling for a dialogue between religion and science—*Between Naturalism and Religion.*

For her part, Karin Wolff maintained, however, that there was "an amazing agreement" between the biblical presentation of the creation of the world in seven days and scientific evidence. The creation of humanity by God in line with biblical teaching was not an explanation that "stood in contradiction to scientific knowledge," Wolff maintained.

While the campaign by fundamentalist religious and evangelical groups to integrate biblical teachings about the origins of the universe ("Creationism") into school curricula has long been a source of controversial debate in the US (where such theories are often referred to by the euphemism "Intelligent Design"), Wolff's proposal represents the first public initiative by a leading German politician to instigate a similar process in Germany.

The Hessian culture minister is well known for her religious convictions. In an interview with the press (Deutsche Presse-Agentur) at the beginning of last October, she already called upon schools to investigate those realms where it was possible to detect similarities between creationism and natural science. According to a comment by the local teacher's union (GEW), Wolff distanced herself from the type of creationism put forward by right wing extremists (in a contribution for the evangelical magazine *Spektrum*), "but argued in a very similar manner to their representatives." In 2006 *Spektrum* declared Wolff to be its "Christian of the Year."

Wolff's initiative for the introduction of religious themes into the scientific curricula of schools was immediately criticised by a number of political and scientific figures. The federation of German biologists and several distinguished professors issued vigorous protests. Ulrich Kutschera, professor for evolution studies in Kassel, declared "We have on the one side scientific facts, on the other, a 2,000-year-old Christian myth. It is unacceptable to question the factual basis of evolution."

At the same time Wolff has received the backing of prominent church men and politicians—in particular the Hessian prime minister, Roland Koch. According to Koch, the school curriculum stipulates that religious and philosophical questions should supplement scientific teachings: "After all one has to warn young people to protect themselves against believing they know everything."

The Bishop of Augsburg, Walter Mixa, welcomed Wolff's proposal, but the most explicit support for Wolff came from CDU deputy Brigitte Koelsch, who also declared that Wolff's proposal was compatible with school curricula and that scientific instruction had to take into account the cultural foundations of Germany, which are "clearly Christian-Jewish" in origin.

The political backing for Wolff in Hesse comes as no

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surprise when one considers that creationism is already on the curricula of at least two schools in the state. According to reports in the Arte and ARD television channels, two schools in the city of Gießen have already supplemented a scientific account of evolution in biology lessons with biblical teaching.

Biology at the private school, August Hermann Francke, in Gießen is taught by a teacher who defends creationism and rejects Darwin's scientific account of evolution in favour of a literal reading of the Bible, whereby the history of mankind is just 6,000 years old. The same teachings are promulgated at the state-run Liebig school in the town. Although the Hessian constitution forbids such indoctrination, the state government has done nothing to prevent the teaching of evangelical fundamentalism at these schools.

While the latest comments by Wolff are no doubt part of an effort to mobilise backward social layers in the run-up to state elections due to held in January next year, her remarks should properly be seen in the broader context of a persistent campaign by Germany's conservative parties for a so-called "defining culture"—a campaign with pronounced nationalist and even racist overtones.

In February 1999 the CDU in Hesse campaigned in local elections on an openly racist platform. At that time its leading candidate, Roland Koch, initiated a campaign against the introduction of a new citizenship law by the federal government. Under the terms of the new law, immigrants who fulfilled a number of conditions were entitled to dual citizenship. Koch launched a campaign against this law in the middle of state elections in order to mobilise the most reactionary forces.

Koch makes no secret of his orientation towards such nationalist forces and maintains his own relations with extreme right-wing organisations. In 2002 he was guest speaker at the Weikersheim study centre, which was set up by the former minister president of Baden-Württemberg, Hans Filbinger. Filbinger was forced to resign from his official posts after it became known that as a naval judge under the Hitler regime, he issued death sentences on behalf of the Nazis against people accused of minor offences.

One year after the racist campaign by the CDU in Hesse, the national leadership of the party introduced a new paper outlining the CDU's new restrictive immigration policy. The policy statement explicitly defined German and European culture on the basis of "Christian-Western cultural values." As a concession to Germany's recent historical past, the statement did insert the word "Judaism" after mentioning Christianity, but that does not alter the fact that the emphasis on "Christian-Western culture" has always been the trademark of the extreme right in Germany.

Discussions in right-wing circles over a "defining German culture" intensified following the terror attacks of 2001. For many in the CDU, its sister party the Christian Social Union and sections of the media, Germany's so-called "Christian-Western cultural values" were to be increasingly defined in opposition to the Islamic community in Germany.

In October 2003 Karin Wolff made her own intervention into this debate by appealing on German television for a ban on Islamic scarves in German schools. Her appeal was a deliberate attempt to incite right-wing forces and whip up a pogrom-type atmosphere against Muslims in Germany.

The Hessian CDU returned to this issue once again this year when the state's minister of social affairs, Silke Lautenschläger (CDU), criticized the controversial decision of a Frankfurt judge (link to article) because the latter had not based her ruling on "Christian" values. "Integration requires a clear point of view. Here there should be no pardon," Lautenschläger stressed. "Our social foundation is the Christian idea of man and the concept of human dignity embodied in the constitution."

In 2003 Wolff claimed that her appeal for a ban on Islamic headscarves and discrimination against members of a particular religious group was based on the German post-war Basic Law and the Hessian constitution. While the latter does refer to "Christian and humanistic traditions," the German post-war constitution makes no mention of Christianity or any other religion.

While the national leadership of the CDU has refrained from commenting on the latest proposal by Karin Wolff for the teaching of creationism in German schools, Chancellor Angela Merkel, who studied physics and is a Protestant, made no secret of her own advocacy of Christian values. In the past she has made clear, for example, that she favours the insertion of a reference to God into a constitution for Europe.

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