

Dialogical 'Religious Education for All' in Hamburg

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URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-100790

Samenvatting

De ontwikkeling ten aanzien van het godsdienstonderwijs in Duitsland wordt gekenmerkt door een variëteit aan verschillende benaderingen waaraan sociale, theologische en pedagogische factoren hebben bijgedragen. Sinds de jaren negentig is de belangstelling gegroeid voor structurele en didactisch verantwoorde vernieuwingen, die echter in de 16 relatief autonome federale staten van Duitsland een verschillende uitwerking hebben gekregen. Geconstateerd wordt dat een confessioneel model van godsdienstonderwijs in de meeste Länder dominant is, maar dat pogingen ondernomen zijn en worden om tot alternatieve vormgevingen te komen die meer recht doen aan een groeiend cultureel en religieus pluralisme. Het gepresenteerde Hamburgse model 'Religionsunterricht für Alle' mag dienen als een voorbeeld van zo'n alternatieve uitwerking waarin de dialoog en interactie tussen leerlingen met verschillende religieuze en levensbeschouwelijke achtergronden een prominente plaats heeft. Hoewel sommige Duitse godsdienstpedagogen en belangenbehartigers het Hamburgse model als vreemd beschouwen en er sceptisch tegenover staan, oogst het model zowel in Duitsland zelf maar ook internationaal veel waardering. Met name in academische kringen krijgt het gezamenlijk onderwijs aan leerlingen met verschillende religieuze en levensbeschouwelijke achtergronden een warm onthaal.

Introduction

At both the national and international level, the question of how to harness religious traditions as resources for mutual understanding and, in addition, how to locate potentials for religious conflicts has been gaining in prominence. Several facts illuminate this development nicely: First, important European institutions have referred to the significance of religions for cooperation in societies and for the resolution of social conflicts in high-profile political statements (Council of

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Europe, 2008). Secondly, after decades of reticence in addressing religious questions, the renowned philosopher Jürgen Habermas has called for “overcoming a rigid and exclusive secularist self-understanding” and now sees religious tolerance as “the pacemaker for multiculturalism, correctly understood, and for the equal coexistence of different cultural forms of life within a democratic polity” (Habermas, 2008, pp. 138, 257). The assumption that religion would fade away in a process of secularisation has long been general consensus in Europe. In the 1980s and 1990s, modernity and religion were viewed as opposites in both public and academic discourse. Modernity would, in the final consequence, lead to a withdrawal of religion from the public sphere. A look at the USA would have been enough to realize much earlier that religion and modernity can coexist very well.

From today's perspective we have become aware how wrong this assumption was, at least in part (Berger & Weisse, 2010; Joas, 2011). Even in France, where the system of *laïcité* has been dominant for over a century imposing a strict separation of church or religion and state, the new trend is evident: Religion is returning to the public space and in the process producing a new paradigm of a *laïcité*, including proposals of including religious issues into the jealously defended school curriculum (Willaime, 2008a).

In short, there is now a growing public awareness of the need to seek dialogue with all parties that can aid us in preventing conflict and supporting peaceful coexistence in a multireligious and multicultural society. This transformation which we can observe in all European societies requires new answers to make diversity a resource for peaceful coexistence instead of a cause of misunderstanding, division and hostility. To this end it is not enough to just tolerate sharing one's space with people of a different language, origin and religion. Rather, it is more important than ever to move towards respect for the Other, as Paul Ricoeur has stressed. He regards as central factors in achieving a secure, stable identity in a spirit of mutual recognition not only acknowledging the Other in his or her otherness, but also recognising oneself as an active and responsible subject (Ricoeur, 2006). Thus, Ricoeur argues for a process of identity formation that is not located in a protected space separate from the Other, but in immediate engagement. The repercussions of this approach at the social and individual level are considerable. Moreover, it also directs our attention to the question of religious plurality. If recognition and respect for the Other is a necessary precondition for the realisation of the self and recognition in social interaction, a plurality of religious positions offers the opportunity to practice this. Regardless of the great difference in conditions between European countries, it is becoming more and more important to study the increasingly influential factor of 'religion and religiosity' and its ambivalent potential for both dialogue and social conflict and tension across those societies.

Education is a vital field for interreligious communication within which this question can be addressed. A colleague from the University of Tübingen's department of political sciences, Hasenclever, even claims that a positive correla-

tion between religious education and political conduct can be shown: The lower the level of religious education is, the greater the potential for religious differences to be exploited as a tool for political mobilisation (Hasenclever, 2003, p. 304). If this hypothesis is right, religious education could be seen as highly important not only for its pedagogical aims but also for its broader societal and political implications. This should not lead us to overstress the importance of religious education in the public arena, where factors such as political context, economic conditions etc. are dominant. Notwithstanding which, it has to be regarded as one valuable contribution to building up resources countering a political instrumentalisation of religion.

It is against this background that growing attention to scholastic Religious Education (RE) in both public and academic debates in Germany must be understood. In them, the question frequently asked is how RE can contribute to peaceful coexistence and communication between people of different religious faiths and beliefs by offering opportunities for interreligious learning in school. At the heart of this article is the outline of one such path, the Hamburg model of dialogical *Religionsunterricht für Alle* (RE for All) in which all pupils in a class are invited to participate regardless of their religious backgrounds or affiliations. Whereas most German federal states offer RE in public schools segregated along confessional lines, Hamburg has chosen to pursue a different approach in addressing the religious and ideological heterogeneity among its pupils. Its model has already generated considerable attention within and beyond Germany and is frequently regarded as a sustainable solution (Weisse, 2008).

In the following, I will present the dialogue-oriented approach of RE for All in Hamburg to provide a more comprehensive picture. Drawing the connection between the dialogical setup of this type of RE and the demands it makes on academic teacher training, I will then also briefly present the Academy of World Religions at Hamburg University with its pluralistic and dialogue-oriented approach.

Dialogue at School: Religious Education for All in Hamburg

Organisational context: Regarding organisational and administrative solutions, two particularly German characteristics need to be kept in mind: First, there is no requirement to agree on a nationwide solution since all decisions regarding education – including RE – are the responsibility of the *Länder* (federal states) in Germany's decentralised system of government. Each of the 16 state governments may design its own form of RE to meet the challenges of a multireligious society. Secondly, the provision of Religious Education in public schools is guaranteed under Article 7, Section 3 of Germany's Basic Law. This stipulates that while the state retains its supervisory role in school RE, as in all matters regarding public education, the content is determined in concert with the religious communities. This co-responsibility is balanced differently in the various *Länder*, which leads to very different interpretations of how the theological

and religious orientation of RE must be weighted in relation to its pedagogical function. For all the difficulties this federal model produces, it offers the opportunity to deploy a variety of responses to the challenges facing RE today, to find different answers and try out different modes of implementing them (Weisse & Doedens, 2000).

General aims: In Hamburg, religious education does not separate students by religious affiliation or philosophical belief. With only a few exceptions, public schools offer the dialogical 'Religious Education for All' (*Religionsunterricht für Alle*). The model enjoys the support of representatives of school authorities, social and political stakeholders, and most of the religious communities in Hamburg (Neumann, 2000). As a dialogical form of RE, it cannot serve as instruction in a specific religion, nor is it designed to. The underlying pedagogical assumption is that bringing up children in a specific faith is the task of the family and religious community.

The function of the public school, in contrast, is to offer an introduction to religious issues that allows students to relate the traditions of different faiths to their own experience. Its goal is not an introduction to one specific religion, but to the religions now coexisting in the city of Hamburg, the 'neighbour religions'. These are defined as the religions of our neighbours in the classroom, the city, and society as a whole. In order to make this approach viable, the various religions represented in our society need to be given greater attention in teacher training. We must also change structures to allow not only Christian RE teachers, but also those of Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and other faiths. Solutions are considered on all these aspects, consulting expert opinion at all levels. However, the suggested introduction of a separate Islamic religious education would represent a regression for Hamburg in terms of integration. Rather, we need additional academic resources for training teachers from more plural backgrounds towards an integrative model of RE. In pursuit of this goal, we have been working for many years to establish an "Academy of World Religions" at Hamburg University, and it appears that our efforts are evidently quite successful: We have for example instituted a new MA programme "Dialogue, Religion and Education" and in February 2013, we began the new international research project "Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies. Interdisciplinary and International Comparative Studies on Possibilities and Limits of Interreligious Dialogue" (see www.awr.uni-hamburg.de).

So much for the current situation in Hamburg. I will now look at the core elements of the Hamburg model of religious education: Our understanding of religion, the underlying rationale for dialogical RE in Hamburg, the thoughts students express on the subject of RE, and the founding principles of the 'committee for an interreligious RE' (*Gesprächskreis interreligiöser Religionsunterricht*) in Hamburg.

The specificity of the context of Hamburg: In the multicultural city of Hamburg of almost 2 million inhabitants, which is at the same time a federal state, we encounter a wide variety of different cultures and religions: more than a

hundred languages and religions or denominations are represented. Eight per cent of the population are Muslims. Hamburg has traditionally defined itself as a liberal city where differences of religious belief do not matter and where people from all around the world can live together (Weisse, 2003). However, we can also observe a growing trend towards xenophobia and distrust of “fundamentalist” Muslims, especially since the 9/11 attacks. Therefore, initiatives and efforts towards better understanding between different communities are more necessary as well as more difficult now. It is in this context that we see the task of our educational work.

Neighbour religions: Religion is understood here in a broad sense, not as a bounded system, but as an orientation which is in flux both in its broad historical development as well as in the individual. The entire variety of religion and religiosity, its reasoning about the origin and purpose of life, the striving for justice and peace are embraced by this definition of religion. We have therefore adopted the term “neighbour religions” instead of “world-religions”. The expression “neighbour religion” approaches different religions in terms of what my neighbour in the classroom, in my village or town, and in the global village believes. Neighbour here is used in the sense Immanuel Levinas uses “l’autrui/prochain” (Levinas, 1993, p. 156) and the person, not a certain codified belief-system, is the core of the concept. “Neighbour-religion” refers our questions to ordinary people in our environment, not to key representatives of religious organisations. In the dialogue with neighbours, the wisdom of religious traditions can be applied immediately and practically. It can provide stimuli and input, but should not become a hindrance for dealing with fundamental questions arising in the context of human dialogue. Dialogue in the context of neighbour-religions does not come from above, but from below. It focuses on relevant questions by the participants, in this case those of the students at school. The prerequisite for a productive dialogue of this kind at classroom level is the opportunity to take advantage of a variety of different cultural and religious backgrounds among the students and not to separate them into homogenous groups – an approach that, though common, is at least ambivalent if not inadvisable in addition to being almost impossible to implement in practice.

Dialogical Religious Education: We call our form of religious education a *dialogical* religious education (Weisse, 1999, 2008). Dialogue is central in our approach, both in theory and practice. Dialogical RE is characterised by the following elements: It relates both to the experiences of the students and to the stimuli of religious traditions. It is contextual and intercultural; and it is based on approaches of ecumenical theology and interreligious learning.

Our approach refers to an experience-oriented understanding of dialogue, which will be explained in greater detail later. Through this understanding, dialogue in the classroom takes on great importance as the venue in which pupils can participate with their different and differential religious and ideological backgrounds and in which they can develop their own views and positions. Questions as to the meaning of life and death as well as about justice, peace and

the integrity of creation are all addressed in these lessons. In many respects, the different religions agree, but dialogue in Religious Education is also designed to explore the differences between religious traditions. The goal is not to compromise individual positions by mixing different viewpoints, but to develop them by contrasting them with others. Religious education should enable a classroom dialogue that allows the participants to refer to their different religious backgrounds, even if it does not require it in order to succeed. Dialogue in the classroom fosters respect for other religious commitments and refers its participants to the possibility of gaining reassurance or making their own religious commitment while critically monitoring it at the same time (Weisse, 2003). This form of religious education must be understood in the context of an educational approach that seeks not to mirror the separation and division in society, let alone increase it, but aims at a reciprocal understanding which treats differences with respect.

In the context of this contribution it is not possible to go into detail about the design, the curriculum, school materials, theological positions etc. of dialogical RE for all in Hamburg. I will therefore focus selectively on the perspectives of pupils and of experts on RE from different religions in Hamburg.

Pupils and dialogical religious education in Hamburg: In the context of a major research project – the REDCo project on Religion and Education in Europe (Weisse, 2007, 2010, 2011) – we asked pupils in the 14 to 16 year age group in Hamburg whether they would prefer to continue in RE for All with students of different religious and cultural backgrounds sharing the same classroom, or whether they preferred an RE separated along the lines of different confessions and religions.

Few pupils – about 3 per cent – favoured separate religious education. They mainly referred to three aspects in support of their choice: In a RE separated by religion, the competence of the teacher, belonging to the same faith as the pupils, is thought to be higher. In a religiously mixed group, problems and difficulties might arise. Religions other than their own could be boring (Knauth, 2008, pp. 240-241).

The majority of the pupils in Hamburg favoured an integrated RE. Here are some of their arguments (all quotations in Knauth, 2008, pp. 238-239): The first refers to the didactic setting: Religious education at school becomes interesting through a dialogue with students from other backgrounds and should not mirror religious instruction in a religious community. A Muslim girl wrote:

I personally think it is better if pupils from different religions are taught together. By this you can much better find out what others think than by just reading it in a book. It is much better to get to know people from other religions who are able to say something about their own religions. If for example in my religion class there would only be Muslims we would all have the same opinion and would not really be able to, well not be able to discuss things at all or learn something new. Then you only learn what you learn at the mosque. I go to the mosque in order to learn

that! It would not be very interesting for me if I would have to repeat in school everything I have learned. It would be boring.

The second line of argument concerns social ethics: Getting to know “the other” contributes to reducing hate. A girl with no formal religious background wrote:

I would not find it to be so good if they were taught separately. This way one can more easily learn about other religions. Besides, I think that by this the hatred of people who do not belong to one's own or a specific religion would more easily be reduced. Besides, the people belonging to a particular religion can explain certain things in their religion. I think if one would separate the pupils who belong to different religions it makes it seem as if they were different (as if you would teach foreigners and non-foreigners or Blacks and Whites separately).

The third argument refers to theology: Separation is considered a sin. The following quotation comes from a Muslim girl:

Yes and in religious education pupils of different religions and ideologies should be taught together. What is the use of separating the pupils according to their religion in religious education? Also the separation of humanity can be considered as a sin. It is said: “Love all people since they have all been created by God, if you do not love them then do not hate them either!”

The last refers to the need to come to terms with difference: Professional competence is the argument of a Christian girl:

No I think we should not be separated. Few (or none at all) have got a problem with us having different religions. And even if you have something against it, you have to get used to it. Later in professional life you will not be able to choose with whom you want to work together.

We can see that students themselves have solid convictions why RE should be taught at school and what aims could be envisaged for an integrated RE in public schools. As a matter of fact, though, this result is also due to the fact that pupils tend to favour the model they already know. Nevertheless it is impressive that they do not only follow what they are accustomed to, but provide strong reasons for favouring an integrated and dialogical RE. The arguments put forward by Muslim students – expressed in the above quotation which exemplifies a common line – should not be forgotten when making decisions how to structure Religious Education in public schools

Interreligious groups for a dialogical religious education: The initial reason for the founding of an interreligious discussion group for religious education was developing a syllabus for religious education in primary school. It became clear that the sporadic contact with members of religions other than Christianity was

inadequate for developing a curriculum. A religiously mixed group was founded with representatives of Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. Additionally, staff from the University, schools, and the state teacher training institute took part. The interreligious group for dialogical religious education in Hamburg – called the GIR (Gesprächskreis Interreligiöser Religionsunterricht) - was constituted in 1995 and still meets regularly – a unique initiative in Germany in which trust has been built up to an enormous extent. The idea that pupils should all participate in religious education without regard to their different religious and ideological backgrounds – with all the pros and cons discussed exhaustively - was approved and developed in this group. This is clearly documented in a unanimous statement issued on 11 February 1997 (published in Doedens & Weisse, 1997, pp. 35-41). The GIR advocates a “religious education for all” that is not divided along religious or ideological lines. Against the fear of some parents that their children would be alienated from the religion lived at home if they learned in a religiously heterogeneous class, they argue that such an approach is necessary in order to prepare them for life in a multicultural society. Mixed RE classes should enable young people “to find their own position in a diversity of religious beliefs and communities and to develop a happiness in the common ground of the diversity. The meeting and debate with the foreign and the possible change of perspective helps the process of development and (re-) discovery of oneself and supports the development of an identity” (ibid., p. 37). The statement further specifies the tasks of religious education in school and emphasizes the difference to religious education at home and in a religious community. It does not presuppose the necessity of first getting to know one’s own background exhaustively in order to be able to enter into conversation with others, but sees the process of development as one in which the pupils’ own views are better shaped in dialogue with others than in seclusion. In summary, it says that pupils should develop their own positions on the meaning and claims of religions in dialogue with their fellow students and contribute their own opinions.

The members of the interreligious discussion group have distanced themselves from any form of religious – and political – exclusivism. This was clearly formulated in a statement of November 1998 (see Weisse, 1999, pp. 294-296). They also rejected the offer of a separate Islamic RE for Hamburg with the same decisiveness as the shura council. In a resolution passed unanimously by representatives of seven religious communities on 12 December 2006, the body emphasised that religious education for all should continue:

„In our plural society, it appears indispensable to us to thematise religions in their diversity. This reflects the real-life experiences of children and youths and helps them understand the specific nature of religions and respect them without creating distance or developing prejudice. It appears more important than ever today to perceive the Other not as a threatening stranger, but as a human and neighbour who can help us expand our own horizons. This will be made more difficult if students are separated by religion and confession in RE instead

of teaching them together, as was previously the case... We reject a separation of religious education along religious or confessional lines both on grounds of religious pedagogy and integration policy." (Weisse, 2008, p. 234).

The resolution supports academically supervised experimental study in school environments and demands the provision of resources for teacher training in religious education for Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and others. Establishing an 'Academy of World Religions' was advocated as necessary for this purpose.

Dialogue at University: The Academy of World Religions

In order to make the Hamburg approach of RE viable, the various religions represented in society need to be given greater attention in teacher-training and teachers from religious backgrounds other than Christian be recruited. In pursuit of this goal, the 'Academy of World Religions' at Hamburg University was established in June 2010.

The 'Academy of World Religions' focuses on religious and cultural plurality (Weisse, 2009). It offers the institutional framework within which to establish the theologies of world religions at Hamburg University. Resources for the study and teaching of Islam, Judaism, Alevism, Hinduism and Buddhism alongside Christian theology are provided here. The religions represented at the Academy are not established separately, but relate to each other dialogically. Their respective theological concepts are connected with those of others to thematise their differences and commonalities. It addresses questions of interreligious dialogue not only in their fundamental dimensions, but also in their relevance for current social issues, in order to make a tangible contribution towards peaceful coexistence in our multireligious and multicultural society.

The Academy of World Religions pursues the following main aims:

- It embraces and develops theological approaches and concepts within all world religions that focus on dialogue as a central feature. These approaches relate to contemporary plural society and actively address their social context.
- Empirical research is conducted into the lives and situations of people of different religions in our society – focusing on Hamburg and other large urban areas in Europe and worldwide – that significantly adds to extant data and can help us to productively relate theological approaches to the reality of living religious practice.
- Contributions to two academic curricula are offered: On the one hand, the Academy is actively involved in the development of training for religious education teachers. The Hamburg model of inclusive religious education requires a religious pluralisation of the teaching body. This calls for academically viable, university-level theological studies in the world religions we address. We also offer a Master's Degree in the field of religion and dialogue to students from a wide variety of fields. Such skills are increasingly impor-

tant in an ever-growing number of professions, not least in multinational companies.

The Academy of World Religions provides a focus for an international and interdisciplinary academic approach towards addressing modern society's cultural and religious plurality within the structure of the university. It constitutes a key improvement in RE teacher training by opening perspectives on the plurality of religions and strengthening the competences required to sustain successful interreligious dialogue.

Conclusion: The Hamburg RE for all in the context of Europe

While the Hamburg model of "Religious Education for All" used to be criticised as insufficiently representing and strengthening the faith of pupils by many German religious educators and stakeholders, it has found increasing recognition in Germany as well as throughout the rest of Europe over the past decade. Teaching pupils together, regardless of their religious affiliations and beliefs, is increasingly favoured among academics in the field. Norwegian and British researchers have pointed to the contribution the Hamburg model makes towards „citizenship-education“ (Jackson, 2008; Skeie, 2008). Efforts in the Netherlands aim at overcoming the divisions of a traditionally „pillarised“ school system of separate confessional schools by creating opportunities for joint learning. The Hamburg approach has offered valuable impulses there (Ter Avest, Miedema, & Bakker, 2008). In France, where the reintroduction of religious education into the public school system in the context of a „laïcité d'intelligence“ is being debated, there are also calls for the religious plurality of society to be reflected in the classroom (Willaime, 2008b). These views are supported by the findings of a Europe-wide research study, the REDCo project (Jozsa, Knauth, & Weisse, 2009; Weisse, 2010, 2011). The qualitative and quantitative surveys of pupils carried out show that most respondents would prefer to see the school more dedicated to teaching about different religions than to guiding them towards a particular religious belief. The research has also demonstrated the importance of the school as a forum of interreligious dialogue and exchange (Knauth, Jozsa, Bertram-Troost, & Igrave, 2008), which could be summarized as follows:

- For pupils with no ties to organised religions, the school is the main forum to learn about religion and the religious perceptions of other pupils.
- For pupils who belong to a religious community, the school provides the main opportunity to come into contact with other religions.
- Many of the pupils are prejudiced towards other religions, but at the same time are prepared to enter into dialogue with others they consider interesting as persons. The school provides a unique forum for them.
- Almost all pupils regard teaching an interreligious understanding at both the personal and the societal level as necessary and possible. The school offers the opportunity to realise this.

The development of Religious Education for the future can no longer be limited to national actors, but must be undertaken at the European level (Weisse, 2008). It now seems vital to create space in public education that takes account of the resources of religions as well as of the dangers of their instrumentalisation for political ends – as has been indicated at the beginning of this contribution. In the educational sphere, it is more important than ever to pave the way for an adequate understanding of the dynamics, the roots and the perspectives of religions in European societies. On this basis, perspectives can be founded to establish viable forms of religious education according to the preconditions and demands of different times and contexts, as we pointed out at the beginning

It currently appears increasingly important – as we suggested in part two – for pluralised societies throughout Europe to allow room particularly for two issues in RE. These are firstly information on religion beyond the bare facts of their sacred texts and authoritative traditions, especially focusing on living religious expressions in Europe. Secondly, it is vital that encounter and dialogue between pupils from different confessional, religious and philosophical backgrounds be made possible in the classroom. Through the immediate encounter with the “Face” of the Other (Lévinas, 1993), the pupils can acquire competences for dealing with religious plurality and difference (Peukert, 1994) that can contribute to peaceful coexistence throughout Europe far beyond the limits of the classroom.

Abstract

The development of religious education (RE) in Germany has been marked by a variety of different approaches shaped by different social, theological and pedagogical factors. From the 1990s onwards, we have seen an increasing interest in structural and didactic reform, though this is implemented differently in the 16 federal states of Germany. Whereas a confessional model of RE used to be dominant in most regions of Germany, efforts are now being made to implement alternatives in order to productively engage with growing cultural and religious pluralism. Here, the Hamburg dialogical “RE for All” can serve as an example of a model giving prominence to dialogue and interaction between pupils of different religious and philosophical backgrounds. The Hamburg „Religious education for all“ has found widespread recognition among experts both in Germany and throughout the rest of Europe. Teaching pupils together, regardless of their religious affiliations and beliefs, is increasingly favoured among academics in the field.

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