Religious Education Between Theology and Religious Studies
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Introduction

In her keynote at the ISREV XX session Marilyn Naidoo introduced us in a very analytical and reflective way into exemplary issues of justice and human rights in her home country, South Africa, focusing on the role of religion in public higher education. From her analysis it became clear that Christianity in the form of Christian theological faculties at South African universities are privileged in an unfair way that goes back to Apartheid times and contradicts the human right to freedom of religion or belief. As a consequence, Marilyn principally called into question the academic integrity of theology and demanded that 'confessional theology needs to be replaced by departments of religious studies'.

It is the construction of this principal opposition between theology and religious studies that stimulated me, encouraged by the editors of this volume, to discuss the relationship of these two disciplines more closely in this contribution, with a special focus on public religious education in schools and institutions of higher education. I will concentrate on four aspects. First, I will give a brief outline of the situation in Germany in order to illuminate my own background and the context from which the following more theoretical perspectives arise. Second, I will look at contemporary concepts of 'theology' and 'religious studies' that can be referred to when their relationship with each other is discussed. Third, I will refer to the social philosophy discourse that I have sketched in my other contribution to this volume (Chapter XXX) as a reasonable framework for relating theological and religious studies perspectives. And fourth, I will refer to concepts of educational philosophy as they have been discussed in Germany over the past decade that offer specific ways to relate internal and external perspectives on religion in the context of education.

The German context: experiences and recent developments

In Germany, confessional theological faculties are – along with a number of Church-run institutions of higher education – integral parts of state-run universities just as confessional religious education is, in most German federal states, an ordinary school subject at state schools. This tradition goes back to the Constitution of the Weimar Republic in 1919, in which the separation of Church and state was agreed on, yet allowing for fields of collaboration. After World War II, the responsibility of the Churches for public education was reaffirmed in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany, in response to a Nazi regime that had misused all institutions of public education for National-Socialist indoctrination. The theological faculties of universities and the school subject of religious education had been the only educational institutions not directly and exclusively subject to government policies and therefore could not so easily be brought into line by the 'Gleichschaltung' efforts of Nazi politicians (see, e.g., Pirner, 1998).

As a result of this experience, the fathers of the German Constitution ('Grundgesetz') decided that it was better for the state to exercise self-restraint when it comes to defining the goals and contents of religious education in schools and leave this to the religious communities, while state supervision should guarantee religious education's formal conditions and its compatibility with basic constitutional values. Consequently, religious education is the only school subject that is grounded in the German Constitution as an 'ordinary school subject' to be provided 'in accordance with the principles of the religious communities' (Art. 7), with an opt-out right for those parents who do not want their children to be subject to confessional religious teaching. The right of existence of faculties of theology at state universities is not part of the *Grundgesetz* but is laid down in the constitutions of the

federal states, which are generally responsible for public education. It was, however, reaffirmed by the Federal Constitutional Court in 2008.[1]

Over the past decade, the dominance of the two big Christian churches in Germany, the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches, in schools and universities has been reduced by establishing Islamic religious education in schools and centres for Islamic theology at universities. In 2016, the fifth centre for Islamic theology was founded in Berlin, like all the others supported by government money. Since 1979, there has also been a University for Jewish Studies in Heidelberg that receives government funding, and for even longer Jewish religious education has existed as an officially-recognized school subject. It is true that within the present legal framework it is hard to do justice to all minority religions and denominations and to those who do not follow any religious belief. However, at least there are some professorships for other denominations and religions, for instance in Orthodox Theology at our University Erlangen-Nuremberg and the newly-established professorship for Alevite Theology at the University of Hamburg. Non-religious worldviews may be regarded as being represented by numerous faculties and professorships for philosophy. At school, pupils who belong to a minority religion or have no religious affiliation can choose to take part in one of the established confessional religious education classes at their school, or alternatively join the philosophically-grounded school subject 'Ethics' that also offers information about religions using a religious studies approach.

Since the re-unification of West and East Germany in 1990, alternative, non-confessional forms of religious and ethical education in schools have been developed in some German states and cities such as in Berlin, the state of Brandenburg, and the city-states of Bremen and Hamburg. Also, increasingly cooperation between confessional forms of religious education – especially between Catholic and Protestant religious education – have

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[1] See http://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/entscheidungen/rs20081028_1bvr046206.html.

been practised and promoted by the Churches: such as, for instance, cooperative religious education classes in Baden-Württemberg and Niedersachsen (for official Church statements see Kirchenamt der EKD, 2014; Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 2016).

Religious studies as an academic discipline in Germany is still partly situated within theological faculties, but has more and more developed into an independent, non-theological discipline with several centres of interdisciplinary research on religion at philosophical or cultural studies faculties within universities. In the sphere of school education, it has gained increasing importance as a basis for non-confessional forms of religious education or for ethics classes, but also for confessional religious education in which teaching units on other religions have become ever more important. The ongoing dispute about the future of religious education at schools is mainly dominated by two positions. One advocates the continuation of confessional religious education with increasing cooperation between denominations and religions as well as with ethics. This position may still be characterized as mirroring the mainstream academic discourse, as well as mainstream educational policies. Recently, however, an opinion poll has raised doubts whether it is still supported by a majority of the German population.[2] The alternative position favours one school subject for all pupils that combines value education and information about religions in a non-confessional, 'objective' way. In this second model religious studies is usually considered to be the primary reference discipline, together with philosophy.

Which theology and which religious studies?

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[2] The polling institute YouGov published a poll in September 2016 showing that 69% of the German population agreed with the abolition of confessional RE in favour of a school subject offering value education for all (https://yougov.de/news/2016/09/28/mehrheit-fur-abschaffung-des-religionsunterrichts-/). However, there are doubts about the representative nature of the poll. In a strictly representative survey by the reputable polling agency EMNID in 2003, a majority of 74% of the German population voted in favour of RE as an ordinary school subject (see http://www.stern.de/familie/umfrage-religionsunterricht-gehoert-in-die-schule-3518768.html).

Of course, any deliberation of the relationship between theology and religious studies must not fail to recognize the diversity of approaches and positions in both disciplines. My contention is that for the field of public education as exercised in state schools and state-run universities we need – as we have in Germany – a kind of theology that does not confine itself to supporting its own religious community but faces its responsibility for the common good of all people in a pluralistic society. I will use the wide-spread conceptual notion of 'public theology' for denoting this kind of theology, and contend that the mainstream of Christian theology in Germany can be characterized by this tendency even though some theologians may not subscribe to the programmatic notion of 'public theology'. One piece of evidence to support this view can be seen in the recent fundamental document of the German Protestant Churches on 'Christian faith and religious diversity', which advocates – and proclaims as a wide consensus among German Protestant theologians – a 'theology that is publicly accounted for' and takes public responsibility (Kirchenamt der EKD, 2015, 73). Another piece of evidence, on the Catholic side, may be seen in Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'* from 2015, which develops a vision for ecological and social issues for the whole world based on scriptural-theological as well as rational arguments and thus also claims public accountability as well as responsibility. It is a telling fact that the notion and concept of public theology was developed in several parts of the world at almost the same time, among others in the US, in South Africa, in Britain and Germany, and that it has from the beginning been an interdenominational and interdisciplinary theological approach.[3]

Although there are, of course, contextual and positional differences that may recommend our speaking of public theolog*ies* in the plural rather than of public theology in

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[3] For the historical genealogy of public theology see, e.g. Graham, 2013, pp. 71-80; Kim, 2011, Part I; Mannion, 2009. From 2007 the Global Network of Public Theology (GNPT) has fostered international collaboration: https://www.chester.ac.uk/node/15313. For public theology in Germany, see, e.g. Moltmann, 1999; Bedford-Strohm, Höhne, & Reitmeier, 2013; Bedford-Strohm, Bataringaya, & Jähnichen, 2016; for South Africa, e.g., Smit, 2009; De Villiers, 2011; Boesak, 2015; for the UK e.g. Graham, 2013; Kim, 2011; for the US, e.g., Tracy, 1981; Thiemann, 1991; Stackhouse, 1987, 2007.

the singular (see Breitenberg, 2003), in my view public theology across most positions and contexts explicates and emphasizes four fundamental principles that form the basis of most mainstream modern theologies in the context of pluralistic societies. *The first principle* is that theology is aware and positively affirms that it represents only one among other valuable religions and worldviews in a pluralistic society and world. Theology is public in the sense that it finds itself in a public sphere that is characterized by religious and worldview diversity and endorses this situation. This principle may be called the principle of modesty or self-limitation. *The second principle* is that theology exposes itself and its religious tradition willingly to critical public discourse, knowing that it will benefit from it in its necessary critical self-evaluation and further development. Along this line, the official Church confessions of guilt, for instance with reference to historical witch-hunts, forced conversions of native people or Christian anti-Judaism, are an important manifestation of public theological responsibility. This principle may be called the principle of self-criticism. *The third principle* is the one that is usually mentioned first when public theology is defined, but which in my view relies on the other two. It is the idea that theology can and wants to make contributions to the common good of pluralistic societies and the world. (Public) theologians insist that their religious traditions possess a potential for critically and constructively addressing societal and global challenges, and that the religious perspectives they bring into public discourse are to the benefit of all, irrespective of their religious or secular worldviews. This principle may be called the principle of self-transcendence or public responsibility. The *fourth principle* is directly connected with the preceding one. If theology wants to offer religious perspectives to the benefit of all, it has to be familiar with the language of its religious tradition but must also be able to communicate these perspectives in a language that can be understood beyond the borders of its own religious community. Theology must

therefore be familiar with the language (and basic codes of arguing) in the public sphere as well.[4] This principle may be called the principle of bilinguality or of translation.

These four principles of public theology that define the basis of theology's relationship to the public sphere in general can be concretized for the field of public education in particular. Universities especially, but, as I would contend, also schools, represent a part of that public sphere with which (public) theology interacts. Public education is an exemplary context where theology encounters other religious and non-religious worldviews; where it experiences and takes part in critical, mainly scientifically informed discourse; and where it can offer its own perspectives and contributions to the educational objectives of public education – and to this end develop attempts to make the language and thought of its religious tradition accessible to a wider public.

As for the academic discipline (or rather academic field) of religious studies, it has since its foundation always been characterized by the tension between its claim to take a 'neutral', 'objective' stance towards religion (e.g., Müller, 1870/1972), which distinguishes it from theology; and its claim empathetically to understand a religion from within (e.g., van der Leeuw, 1933/2014). Ninian Smart, one of the best-known and influential religious studies scholars, especially for British religious education (see Barnes, 2014, chapter 5), emphasized the secular, scientific character of the discipline and its distance from traditional theology; and just because of this character recommended it as basis for religious education at (secular) state schools (Smart, 1968). However, Smart also argued that religious studies need not be

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[4] It is important to note here that the language of the public sphere that is accessible to a broad public is not necessarily and exclusively 'secular'. In Germany, there are notions rooted in the Christian tradition that have found such wide acceptance that they have become an integral part of general public language. For instance, 'Schöpfung' (creation), 'Nächstenliebe' (love of one's neighbour), or 'sin' (Sünde). Of course, it can be questioned how much of their original Christian meaning these notions have retained since they entered the public sphere. But in general the language or rationality of the public sphere (in John Rawls's terms, 'public reason') will always be subject to negotiating processes between diverse groups in society and will thus be in constant flux. It should also be noted that, complementary to the task of translation, Christian theology can also stimulate non-Christians to learn the religious language of Christianity in order to find out if the Christian tradition holds values that are worth discovering.

hostile to the type of committed approach pursued in theology 'provided it is open, and does not artificially restrict understanding and choice' (Smart, 1968, 105-106), and quite obviously his self-concept as a secular scholar included his motivation to take public responsibility by committing himself to interreligious dialogue and public education on values and religions. The German religious studies scholar Udo Tworuschka, among others, has recently underlined this public responsibility of religious studies to contribute to understanding and tolerance between religions and non-religious worldviews (Tworuschka, 2015). He points to the relatively new concept of 'Practical (or Applied) Religious Studies', which in analogy to Practical Philosophy actively addresses ethical and political challenges in our societies and in the world. It critically questions the claims of scientific neutrality and objectivity, advocating rather conscious, well-reflected, and transparent ways of dealing with the unavoidable societal and political implications arising from the scholarly work of religious studies.[5] Apart from his own concept, Tworuschka refers to scholars such as Richard Friedli (Switzerland), Wilfried Cantwell Smith (Canada), Franz Wijsen (The Netherlands), Johann Figl, and Ulrike Bechmann (both Germany). In a personal communication, Tworuschka told me that he sees a clear analogy between the concept of public theology and that of practical religious studies. Both aim to acknowledge the public responsibility that is involved in academic research and discourse. It seems to me that this kind of responsibility could foster mutual recognition, dialogue, and collaboration between theology and religious studies.

Theology and religious studies in a social theory framework

As I have outlined in greater detail in my other contribution to this volume (Chapter XXX; see also Pirner, 2016), both John Rawls's concept of 'overlapping consensus' (Rawls, 2005) and Jürgen Habermas's idea of 'complementary learning processes' of religious and non-

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[5] It is interesting that, in the British context, Philip Barnes has pointed to the problematic development that the phenomenological approach of religious studies and of RE detached itself from aspects of morality or public responsibility (Barnes, in preparation). It seems that the emergence of approaches of Practical Religious Studies is a response to precisely this problem.

religious citizens (Habermas, 2008; 2012) underline the importance of the internal, theological perspectives of religions for a sustained societal consensus on basic political values. To both of them, it does not seem sufficient for a deep, broad and enduring consensus that citizens endorse political principles and values – such as basic constitutional values or the international human rights – for merely practical reasons, solely on the basis of political rationality. Rather, as Habermas has put it, religious citizens should 'have to acquire the secular legitimation of the community on the premises of their own faith' (Habermas, 2012, 324; my translation). Only if political values can be linked and shown to be compatible with people's deepest personal convictions will they feel a strong commitment to them, and accept that others may feel a similar commitment motivated by their different religious or non-religious backgrounds. Therefore, it seems vital in public education to help learners find such ways of undergirding and interpreting common political values from their own diverse religious or non-religious worldviews. And they should also be encouraged to bring in their religious and worldview perspectives to the public discourse as 'cultural sources that nurture citizens' solidarity and their normative awareness' (Habermas, 2008, 111).

It is obvious that for both of these tasks – linking political values to one's own religious tradition, and making contributions from one's own religious tradition to public discourse – internal theological perspectives in terms of what has been called 'public theology' above are vital. However, it is just as obvious that religious studies can play an important part in these processes. On the one hand, comparative religious studies research can be especially helpful in the process of negotiating the common ground of the language of 'public reason' (Rawls), as such comparative approaches can point to identical or analogous concepts across diverse religions – and sensitize us to the differences. On the other hand, the empathetic approach in religious studies may prove supportive of the effort to 'preserve a sense for the articulative power of religious languages' in non-religious citizens (Habermas,

2001, 21), and in religious citizens to develop such a sense for the potential of *other* religions or non-religious worldviews. In the German debates about confessional religious education in schools, it is sometimes overlooked that when other major religions are presented in religious education – which is part of the obligatory curriculum – it is precisely this empathetic religious studies approach that is usually employed and the phenomenological epoché ('bracketing', in the sense of a temporary suspension of judgement) that is required from the religious education teacher.

Theology and religious studies in an educational philosophy framework

As a theoretical foundation for international student assessment surveys, PISA researcher Jürgen Baumert has developed a framework for the structure of general public education that has received much attention and approval in German educational discourse (Baumert, 2002). Baumert builds his theory on the fact that (post)modern societies have differentiated into segments and spheres (e.g., law, science, art, politics, education, religion, etc.) that follow their own rationality and cannot any more be harmonized by one general or overarching theory. Nor can they be substituted by one another or hierarchized by prioritizing one over the other. Rather, they represent genuine modes of encountering or disclosing the world in their own right. Public education, therefore, has the task of introducing learners to the basic patterns of these modes. Baumert identifies four of them: Cognitive-instrumental ways of modelling the world (mathematics, natural sciences); aesthetic-expressive ways of encountering and shaping the world (language, literature, music, arts); normative-evaluative ways of interacting with economy and society (history, economics, politics, society, law); and problems of constitutive rationality (religion, philosophy). It is quite obvious that these four modes can be taken as a basic structure for the standardized school subjects and their tasks in schools. It should be noted, however, that they do not just refer to certain distinct fields of knowledge but claim to characterize typical modes of encountering, modelling, and

understanding the world. Conceptualizing these as irreplaceable modes in their own right also implies that none of them can be turned into a comprehensive worldview. Consequently, this concept rules out, for instance, a kind of scientism that principally denies the right of a religious perspective, just as it excludes a kind of religious fundamentalism that rejects scientific results because they seem to contradict religious assertions.

Bernhard Dressler, emeritus professor of religious education at the University of Marburg, has further elaborated what Baumert's theory of the general structure of public education means for the individual school subject and its theory of teaching and learning ('Fachdidaktik') (Dressler, 2006, 2010, 2012). Taking the different modes of encountering the world as different cultural practices into account, Dressler concludes that public education in general cannot aim at socializing students into one specific cultural praxis, but should rather intend to foster their power of judgement and to facilitate their critical participation in the whole of cultural life. For instance, musical education in schools should not aim to turn students into professional musicians but to enable them to competently participate in diverse cultural forms of enjoyment, practice, and discussion of music – which may include some of them discovering (or being reassured in viewing) music as the passion of their (maybe even professional) lives. By analogy, Christian religious education in schools should not aim to turn students into Christians but to enable them to participate competently in diverse cultural forms of dealing with religion and discussing religious issues – which may include some of them discovering (or being reassured in viewing) religion as the passion of their (maybe even professional) lives.

From this overall objective of public education, Dressler develops his didactical concept. Its basic idea is that at the core of every subject-related education lies the ability to adopt two perspectives and to switch between them. One perspective is the way in which a cultural praxis – or, according to Baumert, mode of encountering the world – views, models,

and understands the world. In school, this perspective is usually represented by a certain school subject and its primary academic discipline. The other perspective is the perspective from the outside, it looks at a cultural praxis and the way it models the world, and implies the awareness that this way is one among other legitimate ways of modelling the world. Dressler refers to Niklas Luhmann's system theory to make this point even clearer, calling the first perspective 'first-order observations' and the second perspective 'second-order observations'. In first-order observations, the world is observed from the perspective of one of Baumert's modes or, for instance, in the perspective of a school subject such as physics: the world is observed as a world of physical phenomena. In second-order observations, the mode itself or the subject itself is oberserved as to how it observes or models the world. Second-order observations operate as a kind of self-reflective process that makes the observer aware of what he or she is doing when observing the world in a specific mode, and also of the unavoidable blind spots that such an oberservation implies. When we observe the world as a world of physical phenomena this is only one possible specific perspective on the world that will not be able to capture many other phenomena. The point of Dressler's educational theory is that an educated person, in the full sense of the word, is required to be competent at employing both perspectives, the first-order observation and the second-order observation perspectives, and be able to switch between them.

Applying his educational theory to religious education, Dressler emphasizes religious education's parallels to other school subjects. In religious education, too, the two-perspective-learning is central for education. On the one hand, it is religious education's task to introduce students to an internal perspective of religion so that they develop an understanding of what it means *to speak or act religiously*, what it means to perceive the world in a (specific) religious perspective. This, Dressler argues, requires employing theological approaches but also ways of experiential learning so that students get an idea of the lived representations of rituals,

symbols and narratives of specific religions and denominations. On the other hand, students must learn to employ an external perspective on religion, to talk *about* religion(s), to develop the awareness that their specific religious – or non-religious – internal perspective is only one among others, and that a religious way of observing and interpreting the world is only one among other legitimate ways of encountering and modelling the world. And, finally, students must develop the ability to switch between the internal and the external perspective.

As already indicated, the internal perspective can be provided or at least guided by theology. The complementary external perspective can best be provided by religious studies, as well as by philosophical epistemology and the philosophy of science. The latter two offer an outside view on diverse human ways of knowing that can help to localize the religious perspective in the context of different modes of encountering and understanding the world. The disciplines of religious studies, such as psychology of religion, sociology of religion, and history of religion, offer outside views on diverse religions and can (in particular by their comparative approaches) disclose the characteristics of the religious mode of encountering and understanding the world. One could even argue that phenomenological approaches within religious studies – by including empathetic ways of understanding internal religious perspectives – can help to cultivate the ability to switch between internal and external perspectives.

Thus, I believe that Dressler's educational philosophy offers a helpful framework for conceptualizing theology and religious studies as complementary reference disciplines for public religious education.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of Marilyn Naidoo's demand for the South African context to replace the theological faculties at universities by departments of religious studies, I have argued for understanding theology and religious studies as complementary disciplines that benefit

universities and schools most by acknowledging each other and cooperating with each other. This contention has been undergirded by conceptual deliberations on the joint responsibility of both academic fields for the common good of society in general and public education in particular (as indicated by the notions of 'public theology' and 'practical religious studies'). It has been further underlined by contextualizing the two disciplines in a social philosophy framework and in an educational philosophy framework. In both frameworks, interrelating internal perspectives of religions and external perspectives on religions proved a key concept to ensure that the positive potential of the religions can benefit all in pluralistic societies and that the risks of religious fundamentalism and extremism are counteracted.

Looking again at the situation in Germany, it is probably fair to say that the academic field of religious studies deserves more attention from the part of theology as well as from society on the whole. Resentments on both sides, on the side of theology as well as on the side of religious studies, should be overcome in order to facilitate fruitful exchange and collaboration. Hopeful developments in this respect are the integration of (secular) religious studies in faculties or departments of theology (e.g., at the University of Leipzig), joint departments or institutes for theology and religious studies at some universities (e.g., at the University of Hannover), and intensive cooperation between departments of theology and departments of religious studies (e.g., between Islamic theology and Islamic studies at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg). Increased exchange and collaboration will hopefully also fertilize the discussion about the future of religious education at schools – to the benefit of the young people who have to find their own religious or non-religious ways to live a meaningful life in an ever more complex and confusing world.

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