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Repression of Religion in General Education? The Case of Germany from a Christian Perspective

The title of this chapter requires some explanations. I have been asked by the editor of this volume for a report and analysis concerning research in general education on religion and religious influences in Germany. Moreover, my task includes a special emphasis on a Christian perspective, as opposed, for example, to a Jewish or Muslim perspective. Consequently, “Christian perspective” here refers to both, my own perspective as a Protestant religious educator as well as to the Christian religion as the object which, possibly, has been repressed or neglected by general education. It should be clear, however, that it is not always possible to identify absent references to religion as pertaining to Christian forms as opposed to other distinct forms of religion or to religion in general. Consequently, it is more adequate to highlight the Christian perspective which will be applied in the present chapter. This is also in line with my own professional expertise and work as a Protestant educator at a Faculty of Theology (Tübingen, Germany). The reference to the question of “repression of religion in general education?” is not to indicate that the present article will avoid the broader task assigned to it, but that it will give special attention to the problematic manner in which religion and religious influences are taken account of – or not taken account of – in contemporary general education in Germany.

The title actually is an indirect quote of a German book published in 2003 “Das verdrängte Erbe. Pädagogik im Kontext von Religion und Theologie” (The repressed heritage. Education in the context of religion and theology), edited by Jürgen Oelkers, Fritz Osterwalder and Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, three leading representatives from the field of general education in Germany and the German-speaking part of Switzerland (cf. Oelkers, Osterwalder & Tenorth 2003). In other words, it was not me who came up with the idea of “repression”. It comes from general education itself.

The title of the book edited by Oelkers, Osterwalder and Tenorth can be read in the sense of the understanding that religion – and theology – have been “underrated” in general education (cf. Käbisch 2015), especially in their actual influence on pedagogical theories of education (for additional discussions also see the contributions in Ziebertz & Schmidt 2006 and the articles in the debate on Käbisch’s criticism, IJHE Bildungsgeschichte 2015). Accordingly, the different contributions to their volume offer historical and analytical insights into the development of general education as an academic discipline as well as into

the role of religious influences in this process. Moreover, the research results also point to lasting questions concerning the relationship between education, theories of education and religion.

In the following, I will mainly refer to the German-speaking tradition in education, following my own expertise (cf. especially Schweitzer 2003; also see Schweitzer 2006). I am not familiar enough with general education in other parts of the world and I have not been able to identify studies that I could rely upon in order to make up for my own lack of international expertise concerning general education.

Finally, a terminological clarification is in place. Throughout this chapter I will refer to “general education” not in the German sense of “Allgemeine Pädagogik” or “Allgemeine Erziehungswissenschaft” – two German terms that denote a sub-discipline of education, sometimes in the sense of the English term “philosophy of education”, although this sub-discipline can also be understood in different ways which I will not discuss here (cf., for an influential example, Benner, 1987). Instead, I refer to “general education” in distinction from the academic discipline of “religious education”, i.e., in the sense of the whole discipline of educational studies.

1. What does “repression of religion in general education” mean?

Several authors, and among them myself, have been critical of general education neglecting the role of religion in education (cf., for example, Nipkow, 1992; Schweitzer 2003 as well as the volumes edited by Oelkers et al. 2003 and Ziebertz & Schmidt 2006 mentioned above). Most recently, it was David Käbisch who claimed that religion is “underrated in educational research” (Käbisch 2015). Yet what exactly does this claim mean? How can it be supported and upheld?

At a time of digital bibliographies and electronic searches, one may be tempted to start out with a quantitative approach: how many titles referring to religion have been published in the field of general education per year? How many references to religion can be identified in educational textbooks, major educational journals and other publications?, etc. Yet such quantitative approaches would inevitably be subject to serious methodological criticism. First, how many titles would be enough? And second, how many references to religion would be required for educational research if it is no longer to be criticized for “underrating” religion?

I do not think that there can be convincing answers to such questions. Any set number of references would necessarily appear arbitrary. A quantitative

approach would indeed be able to serve as a first approach and probably could yield a preliminary impression of the presence – or, more likely, far-reaching absence – of religious topics in general education. Yet in the end, only a very detailed search for what kind of references to religion can be found in the literature could tell if something is missing or if the references tend to be one-sided. This kind of detailed analysis would bring us closer to a qualitative or hermeneutical approach which I will actually pursue in the following. “Underrating” definitely means more than the lack of certain quantities. It also implies certain views of religion and of religious influences in education which need to be traced in a qualitative manner.

Yet even for qualitative and hermeneutical analysis there is the need for clear criteria. At least some kind of benchmark is needed which allows for discerning the research lacuna deplored by the religiously minded critics of general education. Yet how can such criteria be defined in such a way that they will be accepted beyond the circle of those who have a special interest in the relationship between education and religion? My suggestion is to use the following criteria for this purpose: *Wherever religion plays a role as a factor in education, it should be accounted for.*

Or, to put it negatively: *Wherever religion plays a role as a factor in education but is not accounted for in educational research, religion is “repressed” or “underrated”.* For the sake of space, I will quote only four examples which, in my understanding, can be taken as clear evidence for the claim that religion is indeed neglected in educational research.

My first example is the approach called *intercultural* or *multicultural education*. Just like in many other countries, this approach has received more and more attention over the last two or three decades in Germany (cf. the overview by Auernheimer, 1990, which has gone through numerous later editions). In this country, one of the main concerns of the intercultural or multicultural approach in this context has to do with immigration from Turkey, which started more than 50 years ago. About two million people with Turkish background are living in Germany today. From my perspective, Turkish culture – whatever it may be taken to mean in detail – cannot be fully understood if one is not willing to look at possible Muslim influences. The same is true for what, in the context of intercultural education, would have to be called German culture. Both concepts, Turkish culture as well as German culture, are of course problematic in themselves, for example, because they seem to claim that such cultures exist as distinct entities and that they are homogeneous. I will not go into these important critical points here, however, but limit myself to adding that intercultural or multicultural education is incomplete without reference to the religious dimension. It does not account for the religious factor – or even more, it does not even take religion as a factor into consideration. This implies

that religion in the context of migration has not been researched in education, at least not to a degree which would have made it a major topic in this field. While the so-called background of migration has become a core reference in educational debates, religious backgrounds usually are not even mentioned.

It must be added that a more individualizing view of immigrants from Turkey, in order to stay with the example, would not change this evaluation. It would just imply that the question of religious influences concerning individual biographies and identities has to be posed, in addition to the question of cultural and religious influences in general. Posing the question of religious influences does not mean to have answered it, especially not in a pre-defined way which would presuppose homogeneous cultures. Not every individual from Turkey is religious. Yet to close one's eyes vis-à-vis even the possibility of a Muslim influence – and be it the individual's rejection of Islam – means not being open for the respective person and the person's biography. This is true at a collective level as well as at an individual level.

Against this background it must be considered remarkable – and as a clear example of the neglect of religion's influence in educational contexts as measured by the criteria stated above – that the whole debate on multiculturalism in German general education has not included or produced any major accounts of influences of Islam or of the relationship between Christians and Muslims from the perspective of education. There have been interesting beginnings in this direction (cf., for example, von Wensierski & Lübcke 2012), but it seems fair to say that they have remained exceptions and have not been able to influence the mainstream views and discussions.

My second example refers to *children's rights* and especially to *children's right to religion*. This topic has played a major role in my own academic work (cf. Schweitzer, 2013). The movement for establishing children's rights permeates most of the 20th century, culminating in the famous 1989 United Nations' Convention on Children's Rights. The first declaration on children's rights of a general nature, however, was the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted in 1924 by the League of Nations, one of the precursor bodies of the United Nations. It was in fact a very brief declaration, including only five points. The first of these five points states (Geneva Declaration, 1924):

“The child must be given the means requisite for its normal development, both materially and spiritually.”

Obviously, the view of the child as a spiritual or religious being has played an important role in the history of children's rights. Yet in today's educational literature on the topic this does not play much of a role (cf., for example, two of the most recent publications on the topic, Prengel & Winkelhofer 2014; Krappmann & Petry 2016). Neither does this literature do justice to religious views as a factor in this history nor does it consider the question if the point

made by the League of Nations – that children have a right to spirituality or religion – is still of interest today. My own book on “Children’s Right to Religion” (Schweitzer 2013) has been very well received in the field of religious education and has actually been translated into several other languages, but I have never seen it taken up, positively or negatively, in general education. One might, of course, criticize me for wanting to see my book quoted but this is not my point. It is, again, the absence and silence about the relationship between religion and children’s rights which is of critical importance in the present context. The fact that there are – some – accounts of religious motives for violating children’s rights, for example, as a consequence of fundamentalist attitudes (cf. Edler 2016) does not change the picture but rather confirms it.

My third example is *research on youth*. In Germany, especially the studies on youth financed by the Shell motor oil company, which have been published about every ten years since the 1950s, have drawn quite a bit of public attention (cf., as the latest publication in this series, Shell Deutschland Holding 2015). Their results are regularly quoted in the headlines of major German newspapers. Typically, these studies make very little reference to religion – and many other studies on youth have followed their example (for a critical evaluation see Thonak 2003). The Shell studies are also telling in that their authors have actually responded to the criticism that they should give more attention to the religious orientations and interests of young people in their research. The Shell studies’ authors’ response was that young people are in fact not interested in religion anymore and that consequently there is no need to study it either (cf. Fuchs, 1985, p. 66). This response deserves closer inspection, most of all in its circular nature. Religion is considered not important by the researchers and therefore it is not studied. This is not a very convincing argument. Instead, what claims to be a scientific result, has turned into prejudice. How does one know that religion is not important if one has not studied its influence with contemporary youth? There are important exceptions – some studies on German youth include religious aspects (cf. Maschke, Stecher, Coelen, Ecarius & Gusinde 2013) – yet the number of these exceptions is rather limited. So, on the whole, there can be no doubt that German research on youth has truly repressed religion by excluding it from its scope of research from the beginning.

My last example refers to the *historiography of education*. For the sake of space I have to limit myself to one major publication, the 1,100 page volume *Historical Dictionary of Education* (“Historisches Wörterbuch der Pädagogik”) published in 2004 (Benner & Oelkers 2004a). The book actually includes an article on “Religion/Religious Education” which, however, is rather short, for example, compared to other entries like “Technical Education”. What must be called more problematic in the present context, however, is the national and cultural focus of the articles which has far-reaching implications

concerning, among other things, the religious dimension. According to the editors, the articles of the encyclopedia refer to the “European cultural space which – opposed to the Asian or Islamic cultural space – is also influenced by Antiquity and Christianity in its ideas” (Benner & Oelkers 2004b, p. 9). There is no attention then to the roots of European culture in Judaism and no awareness of the longstanding influence of the Old Testament, be it directly on education or on the general culture giving shape to education by providing, for example, guiding images and ideas. In fact, the historical traditions treated in the articles are mostly limited to Modern Times, with often brief introductions to earlier beginnings in Greco-Roman Antiquity, which implies that authors take short-cuts leading directly from Antiquity (“Athens” and “Rome”) to the 17th and 18th century in Germany. This implies that other geographical areas or possible contributions of the Middle Ages or of the Reformation time do not come into view. Again then, religion as a factor in education is not accounted for, although it cannot reasonably be argued that religious influences would not have played a decisive role in the – in this case, Western – history of education and educational ideas.

I will not continue my argument by adding more examples (for a broader analysis cf. Schweitzer 2003). The evidence offered appears to speak a clear language. Instead I want to ask another question which is more difficult to answer.

2. Why is religion repressed in general education? Possible explanations

It is not easy to explain the phenomenon which I have called the repression of religion in general education. Most likely, there is no single explanation that would be satisfactory or could do justice to the complexities of the question. Academic research and the respective discussions are too many-faceted for lending themselves to simple explanations. In the following, I will therefore suggest and briefly discuss no less than six possible explanations. These explanations are not mutually exclusive but may also be considered complementary.

2.1 Secularization

Secularization probably is the explanation that comes to many people’s mind in the first place today. According to this explanation, German education has become more secular in theory and practice which is why this discipline has lost interest in religious questions. While this explanation is somewhat circular—secularization is often understood to mean a lack of religious interest

which then is used to explain this lack—it can still be pointed out that the secularization of general education is in line with general changes of the population and of life styles in this country. So it can be considered just natural that general education has lost its interest in religion.

What speaks against this explanation, however, is the wide-spread critique of the theory of secularization. Major social theorists have actually spoken of the academic uselessness of this theory, of the need to replace it with concepts like “de-secularization” or “post-secular” while still others claim that there has never been anything like a secular society, at least not as a reality (cf. Luhmann 2000; Berger 1999; Joas 2004). From this perspective, it is not so obvious that the reference to secularization holds much explanatory power, although one should not overlook the changes that have indeed taken place in this respect in educational practice and institutions such as schools in Germany. Not too long ago, for example, it was quite important if the principal of a state school was Protestant or Catholic. Today, no one seems to care and most pupils do not even know about the principal’s religious preference (should she or he actually have one).

Even if secularization were just a myth, it is still possible that it can exert its power – especially with those who believe in it; a possibility to be discussed further as a second explanation:

2.2 Belief in secularization

Some statements from general educators testify to the fact that members of this academic discipline are prone to hold on to the assumption of secularization, even long after other disciplines have given up on it or have become quite cautious and refrained in their use of any assumption of this kind (cf., in addition to the literature on German youth quoted above, for example, Edelstein 2001, who formulates his respective assumptions in a particularly clear manner). Consequently, one could argue that it is a deep belief in secularization rather than a factual social process that makes general education repress religion.

But why should this be the case? What could be the motives for such an attitude? At least playfully one could maybe borrow an explanation from theories of conversion. Often it is converts who are most likely to hold on to certain beliefs long after others have given up on them. Considering the enormous influence of religion and especially of Protestantism on general education in Germany in the past, one could say that this discipline has indeed undergone a conversion – a conversion from religion to secularism. Consequently, the assumption that general education must operate in a secular world would have become part of the disciplinary foundation and imaginary identity of general

education. No representative of the discipline, who wants to be taken seriously, would then be allowed to challenge this assumption, let alone follow a different path in his or her own research.

In this context, another possible explanation comes into play:

2.3 Separation between state and church or religion

It seems fair to say that the most prominent object of study in general education today is education sponsored by the state. This is most true for German schools. About 95% of all schools in this country are maintained by the state. It is also true for other fields of education, for example, programs for children and youth in socially difficult situations, in educational institutions catering to deviant youth, street children, etc. In most cases it is the programs run or supported by the state that are studied, not the programs offered by churches or other religious bodies which often exist alongside the programs maintained by the state. Given the separation between state and church, one could argue that general education automatically had to become more secular, in line with its object of study.

Yet again, this explanation is not fully convincing. First, even a most secular discipline can study religious phenomena – such as in the case of the social scientific study of religion which very intentionally is premised upon the use of secular approaches to religion. Second, even if religion were not influential in education anymore in the contemporary situation, this is no reason to overlook its influence in the past. Yet, as we have seen, even historical accounts in general education tend to underrate religious influences. And third, the German version of the separation between state and church is in fact not very strict, for example, compared with the French system or with the situation in the United States. Consequently, the churches or other religious bodies continue to be major players in the field of education – with church sponsored schools, with diaconal institutions, with programs for children and youth sometimes even in cooperation with state schools, etc. It is more than obvious then, that the religious influences and interests are not taken into account although they continue to play an important role in education.

2.4 Normative orientations as an obstacle to academic theories of education

In Germany, general education has been transformed from pedagogics based on personal commitment to an academic discipline based on the principles of neutral observation and explanation (as one of the first conceptualizations of

this point of view in Germany cf. Brezinka 1971). This transformation has been described in a number of different ways. It is related to the so-called empirical turn in general education which meant that empirical research must be given much more attention in this field, rather than basing the understanding of education primarily on normative ideas. This turn can also be described as a turn to the social sciences in general. Theories from sociology and psychology have replaced the traditional references to philosophy and theology. The transformation of general education can also be defined in terms of the relationship between theory and practice. Traditional German general education was often considered to be in continuity with educational practice, which meant that academic theorists in this field would more or less make the ideas of the practitioners their starting point or, even more, the basis of their thinking. Today, in contrast to this, theory and practice are considered distinct spheres – each sphere intentionally guided by its own rules and agendas.

In sum, this transformation of general education as a discipline implies that normative orientations are often seen as an obstacle for general education to do justice to its academic tasks and to the defining characteristics of the discipline's self-understanding. This is why, according to this view, all normative assumptions should be avoided in general education. At the same time, religion is viewed as highly and inevitably normative and therefore irrelevant or even detrimental for general education. Taking religious claims seriously would mean to accept or to invite distorting influences instead of keeping them at bay and minimizing their influence wherever possible.

From my own point of view, it seems difficult to believe that general education is even possible without normative commitments – even rather strong commitments. Accepted remnants of such orientations may be found, not accidentally, in education's reference to the "best interest" of children and youth or in the commitment to justice and fairness in education. Yet such references are not so common anymore while the reliance on deconstructivist perspectives, for example, still seems to be growing in general education.

2.5 General educators as members of Generation X

Sometimes it has been suggested, less in writing than in personal communication, that many representatives of today's German general education are part of a special generation – the generation of those who either experienced an anti-religious conversion in the 1960s or grew up as children of parents who were not interested anymore in nurturing their children religiously. It would be no surprise then that people who either had to achieve individual independence against the religious authority of their parents or who just did not have a chance

to ever become familiar with religion during their childhood and youth would reenact the well-known rule that theory is biography writ large.

This explanation probably applies more to West German biographies colored by the 1960s than to East German biographies influenced by State Socialism. Yet even if different reasons have to be kept in mind for either case, the result would be similar – a generation of educators without religious roots in the sense of a biographical familiarity with religious traditions and a personal relationship to religion.

I am not suggesting that we should make labeling different generations a serious academic explanation. Yet if it is true that Generation X is followed by Generation Y, which is more open to religion again – as some people seem to assume – it will be interesting to see if the younger generation of general educators will follow their academic fathers and mothers by continuing the repression of religion or if they will find different ways of advancing their discipline.

2.6 Differentiation and specialization in the academy

Sometimes colleagues from general education tell me that they prefer to leave religious questions to me because I, as a religious education specialist, would certainly be much better prepared to work on such questions. Although they probably say this with tongue in cheek in order to get rid of my annoying questions, there nevertheless may be some truth to this understanding. Religious education has become an academic discipline of its own in Germany, doing its research often independently of general education (cf. Schweitzer, Simojoki, Moschner & Müller 2010). One could argue then that general educators can more and more rely on religious educators to deal with matters of religion while they themselves can concentrate on other questions.

In sum, as stated at the beginning of this section, it is probably impossible to say which of these six explanations will hold true in the end. Most likely, there is truth to all of them, at least to some degree and depending on how one tries to apply them. From my own point of view, they should all be taken seriously.

With all of them, however, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between explanations and good reasons. None of the six explanations described include good reasons for neglecting religion in education. Instead, these explanations make such negligence look like a blind spot. Knowing why humans have blind spots explains their optical limitations – it neither justifies them nor remedies them.

3. Is the repression of religion an exclusively German phenomenon?

As stated at the beginning, I am not familiar enough with general education in other countries in order to make comparative statements concerning the question of whether the repression of religion is an exclusively German phenomenon or not. The initial inquiries which I could make – with the help of some friends and colleagues in other countries – show that the possible interest general education may take in religious questions, very much depends on the context. For example, the existence and influence of religiously sponsored universities plays a role in this, as in the United States (cf., for example, Sterk 2002) – and one should keep in mind that famous institutions like Harvard, Princeton and Yale all have religious origins and histories. Moreover, the tone of the respective discussions seems to vary from country to country (cf. Thomas 2006). That religious education is a ‘contradiction in terms’ appears to be a widespread opinion among British general educators, just like the view that religious education falls into the category of indoctrination (cf. Hirst 1994).

Yet these are just some impressions that I cannot pursue here any further. What I want to offer instead is a number of observations that may be of interest in terms of the international and transnational questions this volume is based on.

It is quite obvious that most of the explanations for general education’s disinterest in religion, which I suggested above, refer to phenomena that are discussed in many countries. This is certainly true for the possible influence of secularization but also for the separation between state and church or religion. The self-understanding of general education as a non-normative discipline is also shared by many representatives of empirical research in education around the world. Specialization and differentiation certainly are mechanisms that can be observed in the academic world in many places, and religious education has become a discipline of its own in many countries as well. Even the biographical effects of the 1960s are clearly present in many countries of the Western world. These observations could at least motivate more systematic research on the impact of such influences on general education’s attitudes vis-à-vis religion in different countries.

My second set of observations relates to transnational phenomena. Quite obviously, the transformation of German general education has to do with the social sciences. At the same time, the social sciences have been very internationally minded, and there were many personal transnational exchanges involved as well. On the one hand, at Frankfurt am Main, for example, one may think of the two heads of the Frankfurt School of Sociology, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who had to emigrate to the United States and

developed major publications there such as their “Dialectic of Enlightenment” (reprint Horkheimer & Adorno 2002) or “The Authoritarian Personality” (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson & Sanford 1950), which later became quite influential in Germany. Talcott Parsons, on the other hand, one of the most influential American sociologists of the 20th century, studied at Heidelberg where he worked, among others, on Max Weber (cf. Parsons 1951). Although Parsons’ approach is clearly different from Weber’s, it can still be called Weberian in a certain sense. Parsons theory of social systems later became one of the favorite objects of the critique developed by another Frankfurt person, Jürgen Habermas, while it deeply inspired others like Niklas Luhmann (cf. Habermas & Luhmann 1971). Such observations concerning transnational influences and exchange in the social sciences could lead to the understanding that it was not the discipline of education itself where transnational transfers took place but that such transfers affected general education via the social sciences.

I would like to mention just one example that I am familiar with from personal communication: Peter Martin Roeder, later the director of the renowned Berlin Max-Planck-Institute for educational research and, by the way, a close friend of Karl Ernst Nipkow’s, a leading religious educator in the second half of the 20th century (both studied and worked at Marburg under Elisabeth Blochmann). Peter Martin Roeder went to the not very well-known Shepherd College in West Virginia USA in the late 1950s or early 1960s. From there he brought back a deep interest in sociology and empirical work that he later successfully introduced to German general education (cf., for example, Roeder, Pasdzierny & Wolf 1965).

It is obvious then, even if the attitudes concerning religion in general education vary from country to country due to national and regional traditions and circumstances and maybe even due to different mind-sets or personal attitudes, it is to be expected that what David Käbisch calls the “underrating” of religion in general education definitely is not just a German phenomenon. There are international and transnational dimensions involved that should be uncovered in future research – maybe beginning with this volume.

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