

Dialogue Needs Difference: The Case for Denominational and Cooperative Religious Education

1. Denominational Religious Education in Educational Perspective

In the following, I want to argue for dialogical religious education. In my understanding, dialogue must be based on difference. It is differences that make dialogue necessary and worthwhile in the first place, and dialogue must prove its viability and importance in the face of differences that cannot be overcome, not even through dialogue. Dialogue is not the end of difference, and difference should not be the end of dialogue.

The differences that will be emphasised in this chapter, refer to religion, more exactly, to the different denominations within one and the same religion – most of all within Christianity and there within Protestantism, but Roman Catholicism can also be considered a denomination in the present context – and to different religions or religious traditions. Education can hardly be oblivious to these differences if it wants to be dialogical. This is why I will make a case for the presence of these differences within religious education not only as an object of study but also in terms of different educational programs within the curriculum of the state school. In doing so, however, I want to avoid the term confessional religious education because this term is easily misunderstood. In British English, it has become an equivalent for indoctrination (cf. Copley, 1997, p. 101) which is not what I argue for. The aim of religious education should not be to make students, for example, Protestants or Catholics, but should be truly educational from the beginning. The term that I propose to use, denominational religious education, is more open than confessional religious education. It does not include the understanding that religious education should teach – let alone indoctrinate – children and adolescents into a certain denomination, religion, or belief. It also does not presuppose that the students participating in a certain program actually belong to a certain denomination or religion. It simply means that the perspective from which it is taught, is openly admitted and clearly defined. In the case of Protestant religious education, for example, which is my own background, this implies that the teacher must be open about his or her own religious background or presuppositions, and that he or she must be willing and able to state the reasons for his or her convictions. Moreover, it is assumed that the students have the right not to share these convictions but to openly question and criticise them in discussion. The educational process in denominational religious education aims for personal and existential probing and

judgment rather than for uncritical acceptance (for my own perspective cf. Schweitzer, 2006).

Even if there are good reasons for denominational religious education, it is easy to see that this kind of religious education by itself is not enough to do justice to the need for dialogue. This is why my argument is not limited to denominational religious education but includes what is called cooperative religious education, i.e., the dialogical expansion of denominational models (cf. Schweitzer, Biesinger et al., 2002, 2006, Schweitzer & Boschki, 2004). This kind of cooperation is not only a theoretical idea but actually is in use in hundreds of German schools, and its effects have been tested empirically, including an evaluation of the teaching and learning process as well as of its results with the students (Schweitzer, Biesinger et al., 2002, 2006; Kuld et al., 2009). There are similar examples, among others, from Austria (Bastel et al., 2006). The model brings together the participants of different denominational programs and learning groups in order to give them a chance to share their understandings with others who participate in different programs.

It has often been said by the critics of traditional confessional religious education that this religious education falls way short of the demands of interreligious education. Consequently, we could say that interreligious education is the test case for this kind of religious education. If the model does not stand this test, its future should indeed be in question. In the following, I want to take up this understanding by examining if and how denominational religious education and dialogue can go together. Moreover, I will try to show that this model is in fact especially suitable for dialogical purposes. Before doing so, however, I want to address the basic question if denominational religious education should be part of the (state) school curriculum or not.

2. Should Denominational Religious Education be Part of the (State) School Curriculum?

The cooperative-dialogical model advocated in this chapter presupposes that there actually is a place for denominational religious education in state schools. This presupposition is not shared by a number of educators and religious educators in Europe and beyond. This is why I briefly want to consider a number of arguments that have been advanced in this respect (eg. the official statements from the Churches in Germany, EKD, 1994; DBK, 1996).

The first reason for denominational religious education is the reality of the different denominations and religions in contemporary society. In spite of all efforts of Christian ecumenism that aim at Christian unity, like the Papal encyclical *Ut unum sint* (John Paul, 1995) or, on the Protestant side, the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century with the establishment of the World Council of Churches, this unity has not been achieved. The progress of ecumenical

dialogues should be appreciated, theologically as well as politically or socially. Yet it cannot be overlooked that the different denominations continue to hold on to their separate existence. Similarly, the increasing importance that has been attributed to interreligious dialogue has not changed the picture in respect to the different religions and their existence as separate traditions or social bodies. The same is true for the effects of religious individualisation (cf. Berger, 1979; Luckmann, 1991). Typically, Christians do not want to become Muslims, and Jews do not want to be Christians, etc. Although religious identities may combine elements from different traditions, this does not mean that the different traditions have ceased to exist.

This social reality of different denominations and religions does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that each denomination or religion should have their own religious education in state schools. Yet it can at least be argued that religious education should not be limited to treating religion in general. This limitation would clearly mean that children and adolescents will not be prepared for the reality they encounter beyond the school. Moreover, at least in part even today, children come from homes that are strongly influenced by these denominations and religions, even if, on the whole in western countries, we are dealing with an increasingly individualised religious situation. The backgrounds of these children should not be neglected, just as religious individualisation should be addressed by religious education. Different denominations and religions have stayed a social reality.

In some countries, most notably in France and in the United States of America, there are legal obstacles against the presence of the religions in the state school. In such countries, no religious education is allowed, independently of its denominational or non-denominational character. The only exception possibly is an approach to religious topics on the basis of religiously neutral religious studies. It is obvious that the reasons for this understanding of the separation between church or religion and the state can only be understood in terms of the special histories of such countries (cf. Nord, 1995; Willaime, 2007). In most other countries that are no less democratic or liberal, some kind of limited and controlled cooperation between state and church or religions for the purpose of religious education in state schools works quite well. Countries that exclude religion from the school curriculum have to deal with the often unwanted and undesirable consequences of the privatisation of religion (Osmer, 1999). If religion is not part of the curriculum, it is also not possible to include it with educational purposes.

Another point refers to the parents. Historically, religious education has been strongly related to parents' rights. These rights, including the right to give religious direction to their children, is guaranteed as part of human rights. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states in article 26, 3: "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." The *United Nations' Convention on Children's Rights* includes, in article 14, the un-

derstanding that parents have the right to give their children direction in respect to religion. The question resulting from such rights refers, among others, to the influence of the school. How much religious influence exerted by the school against the will of the parents should be accepted? How much say should the parents have in terms of the denominational or religious orientations that their children encounter or appropriate, intentionally or unintentionally, at school? The answers are not easy. Many educators would argue that parents' rights cannot justify insulating children from the reality of today's society or world. Consequently, parents have no justified claim in demanding that their children should not even be exposed to religious convictions other than their own. Yet this does not settle the issue. Are parents entitled at least to some kind of religious education that is in line with their own convictions? Do children have a right to choose a program that is in line with their religious background or preferences? In some countries, the answer is yes, in others it is no. This difference again indicates how much the place of denominational religious education in school is determined by the special histories of the countries in question.

In addition to such considerations referring to the legal presuppositions of education, there are also pedagogical reasons to be discussed. They refer to the development of religious identities, to learning in relationship to religion, and to the teacher-student relationship. While it is often said that the formation of religious identities is not the task of the school, it is harder to argue against the more modest claim that schools should to some degree contribute to the development of religious identities. Even where a religiously neutral religious studies approach is preferred, there often is the understanding that students should have the opportunity for some kind of existential relationship to the religious convictions presented at school (for a discussion see Cush, 2007).

General educators sometimes compare the learning process in relationship to religion with that relating to language (Benner, 2002, p. 64). Just like you cannot learn to speak by avoiding all existing languages in favour of some kind of Esperanto, so you cannot learn in the field of religion without coming into close contact with one of them.

Finally, one can argue that religion becomes an interesting topic in education only to the degree that religious truth claims can be taken up and discussed (cf. Nipkow, 1998). With children and adolescents, this means that they should have the chance to argue with a person who actually holds the convictions in question. It makes a difference if one just talks about certain convictions that someone might have, or if one does so in direct contact and personal dialogue with other people. This is not to say that only personal contact can be educational. Yet both experiences are needed in education, neutral information and personal or interpersonal engagement.

In sum, the case for denominational religious education is at least open. There are good reasons for this kind of religious education. The strongest convictions that speak against it, are related to the historical experience in some

countries and cannot be generalised to all others. Educational considerations speak against confessional religious education in the sense of indoctrination but this critique does not apply to a denominational religious education that is educational rather than indoctrinating.

3. Dialogue and Difference

“Dialogue needs difference” is the headline that I have chosen for this chapter. This understanding presupposes a theory of dialogue in general and particularly of interreligious dialogue that goes beyond my present analysis. No doubt, there have been many different understandings of dialogue in history – beginning, for example, with the famous Socratic dialogues rendered by Plato that aim for the realisation of not knowing or the dialogical consultations on religious peace undertaken for the sake of religious or at least political agreement. Recent examples of interreligious dialogue and education point to another direction that can be characterised with terms like mutual understanding and respect or tolerance.

The relationship between dialogue and difference is another far-reaching topic of its own. It has also been treated in different fields of analysis and research, in philosophy and theology as well as in psychology and other disciplines. In the present context, I have to limit myself to a number of basic considerations that will shed some light on the tasks of religious education.

In education and religious education, one major reference point for dialogical approaches is the philosophy of Martin Buber. The core of this philosophy is the I-Thou-relationship that is closely linked to the concept of encounter (Schweitzer, 2009; see also Knauth, 1996 and some of the contributions in Miedema, 2009). Encountering another person implies a distinct mode of relating to this person, a kind of co-presence that allows the other to be another I, instead of just being the object of my ways of perceiving and interpreting the other person. We can also speak of a relationship between two principally equal subjects instead of the subject-object-relation that implies making the other fit into my preconceived categories of understanding and valuing. This mode of being with the other is the characteristic of true encounter and, in my understanding, the presupposition of dialogue or dialogical attitudes.

Another basic reference point for the understanding of dialogue in education is difference or the otherness of the other. Dialogue becomes necessary and meaningful when there are differences that can only be addressed by at least two persons entering into an exchange by talking and listening to each other. There is no need for dialogue where such differences do not exist. Only if I need the other as a source of information and self-interpretation as an indispensable source for insights, does dialogue become truly necessary. Only in this case will there be no alternative to dialogue. Putting it another way, we can also say that dialogue presupposes disagreement. Two persons enter into dialogue if and be-

cause they are not of the same opinion and, at the same time, they agree that the disagreement should not be overcome by the one overpowering the other or by forcing him or her into compliance. This is why dialogue is often associated with peace. In this respect, dialogue is the alternative to violence and war.

Sometimes dialogue can lead the way to an agreement, thus overcoming earlier disagreements. Two persons can arrive at the same understanding – through dialogue. Yet realistically, in most cases, dialogue is not the end of all differences but can also lead to a deeper understanding of different points of view. In dialogue, we can agree that we really disagree. Yet dialogue means that even then there should be peace between us. Moreover, it means the willingness to continue listening to the other and not to refuse him or her altogether for the sake of the differences that cannot be removed. In this respect, dialogue is closely related to tolerance in the sense of being willing to live with difference and of accepting and respecting another person (cf. Schweitzer & Schwöbel, 2007).

Given the limitations of educational settings and of the participants that distinguish them from other settings of interreligious dialogue, for example, within an academic or ecclesial context, it seems realistic for religious education to work with the model of dialogue as living with difference. In this respect, “dialogue needs difference” also refers to the learning situation. In education, we must ask how dialogical attitudes can be acquired. This question can also be treated from a number of different perspectives. Among others, it refers to educational attitudes and models, to the psychology of learning, and to the results of religious education that can be tested empirically. In the following, I will take up the perspective of different approaches to dialogue in religious education. Given the lack of empirical data that could be used for comparative evaluation of such approaches, a theoretical analysis seems to be the best we can do at this point.

4. Different Approaches to Dialogue in Religious Education

In this section, I want to render and to discuss four different models of dialogue in religious education. All four of them are aiming at making religious education more dialogical. In this respect, they are parallel models. Yet it is easy to see that they follow very different understandings of dialogue.

It should be understood from the beginning that the four models presented in the following are not meant to be exhaustive of the field. While there are similar models in many different European countries, they are taken from the German discussion in the first place. In my description, however, I will try to generalise them as far as possible, by excluding some of the details that probably apply to the German situation exclusively.

(1) The first model grows out of traditional denominational instruction. It is especially expressive of many official Roman Catholic statements since the 1960s,

i.e., in post Vatican II times. The core concept here is ecumenical openness. According to this view, teachers should teach Catholic religious education but in such a way that its inclusive character – its openness to other denominations and religions – becomes a guiding principle (cf. DBK, 1996).

In my understanding, it is obvious that this new openness can foster tolerant and dialogical attitudes. To the degree that, for example, Catholic religious education acknowledges that non-Catholic denominations and non-Christian religions may include salvation and truth, even if to a minor degree compared to the Catholic Church – the well-known Vatican II understanding of the relationship between the Catholic Church and other denominations and religions – a positive relationship to them becomes plausible for the students.

Compared to earlier times and attitudes, this new appreciation of other denominations and religions should not be underestimated, be it in the case of Catholicism or of other examples. It does make a difference if the other is no longer refused as a heathen aberration. Yet it is no less obvious that this model is hardly satisfactory. Dialogical attitudes are supported but exclusively in the absence of those with whom dialogue should take place. In the case of many schools, this means that the others who are sitting in a classroom next door, will be talked about but will not actually be invited in so that they can be part of the dialogue. Moreover, as is also well-known from the contemporary theological and philosophical discussion, inclusivism and the idea that the other's truth is a minor version of one's own, is hardly convincing (cf. Schmidt-Leukel, 2005). Dialogue presupposes more open attitudes towards the other and most of all equality as its starting point. There would be no need for dialogue if the different religious truth claims could be ordered hierarchically before the dialogue ever starts.

(2) The main alternative to the model of ecumenical, religious or theological openness is the approach based on religious studies in the sense of the scientific study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*). In this case, the need for dialogue is considered the reason for leaving behind all traditional legacies of religious education to a certain denomination or to a particular religion. The aim is to base religious education exclusively on an academic or scientific approach to religion (for recent discussions on this see Alberts, 2007; Cush, 2007; Frank, 2010 and the chapter of Tim Jensen in this book).

The main reason often quoted in favour of this model is the separation between state and church or religion. Only religious studies as a purely scientific enterprise would escape the open or hidden obligations to one particular religious outlook that must jeopardise state neutrality. We have already considered this argument above in relationship to the place of denominational religious education in the state school. In the present context of dialogue in religious education, however, an additional point must be discussed. Representatives of the religious studies approach claim that their approach is the only possible way to-

wards dialogue. According to them, all other approaches must fail because they cannot overcome the paralysing effects of opposing truth claims.

It is worthwhile to consider this claim in some more detail. In their joint statement on religious education, Wolfgang Edelstein, Fritz Oser, Jürgen Lott and Karl Grözinger express it in the following way:

Only the presentation of one's own and the alien religion that temporarily abstracts from itself and casts statements of faith into a comparable terminology, makes possible dialogue for understanding and a conversation that clarifies values between different religious positions. A juxtaposition of creedal confessions that is not mediated in this manner, cannot achieve this but will only lead to misunderstanding, not understanding and frustration (Edelstein et al., 2001, p. 114, my translation).

According to this point of view, a religious studies approach is the only way to dialogue. Only this approach is based on the "comparable terminology", a terminology derived from the philosophy of religion or from the social scientific study of religion that can equally be applied to all kinds of religion, for example, by interpreting religious beliefs in a functional mode. The possible objections to this understanding of dialogue, however, are no less obvious in this case. Theologically and philosophically, it is doubtful if religious studies can really offer something like a superior perspective above the opposing truth claims that consider themselves to be ultimate. Such a God-perspective is not available, at least not humanly. Epistemologically, it is a contradiction of terms.

Educationally, however, the main problem must be identified in a different aspect. If dialogue needs difference, learning dialogue presupposes encountering difference. To the degree that the religious studies perspective really succeeds in establishing – following its basic aspiration – a superior point of view that allows for encompassing the seemingly contradictory truth claims, it makes all contradictions disappear. In this case, students will not acquire dialogical attitudes or skills but will come to understand that there really is no need for dialogue. You just have to look for a superior point of view. In this sense, religious studies is monological. It is the end of dialogue.

Where a religious studies approach is coupled, like in France, with the exclusion of all ostentatious religious symbols from the school's premises, this characteristic of this model becomes most visible. Religion should be taught in the absence of difference, at least in terms of visible differences or of the symbols presenting such differences.

Finally, there is the question of the reality of teaching on the basis of a religious studies approach. Will the religious neutrality required by this approach indeed be maintained in classroom situations? What kind of teacher would be required in this case? Empirical studies raise serious questions concerning religious neutrality in teaching. A recent survey from Switzerland, for example, indicates that the personal convictions of the teachers strongly influence the re-

ligious orientations prevalent in the respective lessons and that most teachers working within a religious studies based model are in fact far from neutral in their actual teaching (Frank, 2010, p.264). This finding fits well with the observation that many religious education teachers are themselves not aware of the confessional or denominational orientation of their teaching practice (Biesinger, Münch & Schweitzer, 2008). It should also be noted in this context, that the attitudes of the teachers in different countries were found not to match the theoretical models but to overlap in many ways that are not in accordance with theoretical expectations (Schweitzer, Riegel & Ziebertz, 2009).

(3) The third model that I want to consider here, tries to avoid the educational shortcomings of scientific neutrality by combining a denominational basis with programmatic openness for all children and adolescents. In Germany, this model can be found in Hamburg where Protestant religious education has been very active in making interreligious dialogue its guiding model (Knauth 1996; Doedens & Weisse, 2009).

The merits of this model can be seen in its pioneering function for dialogical religious education. Similar to the multifaith model in England and Wales, the Hamburg model has been among the first to realise the central importance of this task. As opposed to the situation in England and Wales, however, the Hamburg model maintains its Protestant basis, a basis that cannot escape the tension between an exclusive or particular legacy on the one hand and the universal openness intended on the other. In fact, this is an issue that has never been settled satisfactorily for this model. A true multifaith approach presupposes radical equality – a presupposition that ultimately is also not realised in England where the Church of England remains an established church and reserves the right to veto the decisions of all others in matters of religious education (this is one of the reasons why the British multifaith model is criticised from a strict religious studies perspective for which only the Swedish model is convincing, cf. Alberts, 2007). In the case of Protestant religious education, like in Hamburg, the others – Catholics and atheists but also Muslims and Jews – remain guests who, in spite of the openness of the friendly Protestant host, continue to be dependent on the decisions of this host who, so to speak, continues to hold the rights of the owner of the house.

From the perspective of education, this inequality of ownership is reflected in the position of the teachers. Only Protestant teachers can be fully responsible for this kind of religious education while other teachers may be invited but can never teach independently of their Protestant colleagues. Sometimes, because of the lack of teachers with other backgrounds, there has been the attempt of making the children and adolescents in religious education the partners for dialogue with the Protestant teacher. Yet empirically, this does not seem to work because the students are not prepared to take over this role and, most often, they are lacking the acquaintance, for example, with Islam for which they would then

have to act as specialists and spokespeople. According to a critical study based on classroom observation, this is a position that the students themselves strongly dislike (Asbrand, 2000). Recent survey results indicate that many students in Hamburg are in favour of this approach (Knauth, 2008). Yet their acceptance can hardly be used as an answer to the questions above.

(4) The fourth and last model that I want to consider here, is cooperative religious education. The concept of cooperative religious education was first introduced by the Protestant Church in Germany in 1994 (see EKD, 1994). According to this statement, cooperation means joint phases of teaching and learning within groups which come together by combining different groups mostly from denominational Catholic or Protestant religious education and, if applicable, from Jewish or Muslim religious education or from ethics groups. The guiding idea of this model is that ecumenical or interreligious education or dialogue should not mean learning *about* the others in their absence but *together with them*. The cooperative model is based on two educational expectations which are related to “identity” and “dialogue”. It aims at supporting the formation of religious identities but it also insists on the dialogical character of all identity formation and on the need for mutual understanding, tolerance and respect for the other. In 1996, the Catholic Bishops in Germany released a statement (DBK, 1996) in which they also endorse cooperative religious education, at least for certain situations. On the basis of these statements, at least in certain parts of the country – like the states (*Länder*) of *Baden-Württemberg* or *Niedersachsen* – extensive experiments with cooperative religious education in several hundred schools have come into existence. A number of research projects were carried out in order to find out about the effects of this model.

The empirical work of my own research group quoted above (Schweitzer, Biesinger et al., 2002, 2006; Kuld et al., 2009) belongs to this larger context of establishing cooperative religious education. Given the religious affiliation of the population in our region and given that there is no Muslim or other non-Christian religious education in this area, the focus of the cooperative model has been on Protestant-Catholic cooperation. Yet it has also been shown that this limitation must be considered an initial step and that, with the establishment of Muslim religious education in Germany, the cooperation should and could be extended to Christian and Muslim religious education. In the present context of dialogue and difference, one of the strongest advantages of this model can be seen in the availability of dialogical relationships between teachers from different backgrounds who come to work together, and between students with equally different backgrounds. At the same time, the sequence of different settings – in groups that are denominationally homogenous and in groups that comprise all kinds of backgrounds – allows for both, supporting the development of religious identities and of dialogical skills and attitudes (Schweitzer & Boschki, 2004).

In our own understanding, Protestant-Catholic cooperation in religious education has to honour two major educational aims: (1) to strengthen the experience of Christian unity but also (2) to do justice to the differences between different traditions within Christianity. Since this may sound too theological to many religious educators, it is important to add that we did not make theological doctrine our starting point but the children themselves. We are interested in their religious needs and in their experiences with religion and the church, in their views of religious education and in their preferences for different kinds of religious education.

Although the results of the empirical studies concerning cooperative religious education are quite encouraging, a number of problems remain to be addressed. Maybe the most serious problem which by the way also applies to other dialogical models, concerns teacher training. How can it be achieved that the teachers are familiar enough with more than one denomination or religion so that they are prepared for cooperation and dialogue?

5. Perspectives for the Future: Different Paths towards Dialogical Religious Education in Different Locations?

While I am in support of the cooperative model, my claim is not that it is the only model that should be pursued in the future. It is probably much more realistic to assume that different models will continue to exist in the different countries and locations, most of all due to their plausibility in the light of the special circumstances there. Political decisions are not made on the basis of research or academic insights; they tend to follow popular convictions.

Nevertheless, it makes sense at this point to review some of the observations in this article. In doing so, I want to offer some additional considerations concerning the relationship between dialogue and difference, i.e. the basic perspective of the present article. How are dialogue and difference brought together within the different approaches?

In a certain sense, all of the approaches described are trying to include both, dialogue as well as difference. It is easy to see, however, that the first two approaches – ecumenical openness within denominational religious education and the religious studies approach – tend to minimise the role of difference, although for different reasons and in different respects. In the first case, difference is only allowed to be present at the level of content. Members of other denominations or religious groups are not present in the group. In the second case, all differences are subjected to the overarching perspective of religious studies that should be able to include them within a unitary explanatory view. Thus, the differences disappear within the unifying system of scientific explanations. Consequently, the first two approaches tend to be less dialogical than the latter ones. In a way, they even remain monological.

The “religious education for all” approach realised in Hamburg has a deep interest in dialogue and has been successful in bringing together children with diverse backgrounds as well as, although only occasionally, teachers with different denominational and religious backgrounds. The dialogical nature of this form of religious education is hampered, however, by the fact that all of this takes place exclusively within Protestant religious education. One of the basic requirements of dialogue – equality – can consequently not be realised here.

The fourth model avoids this difficulty by bringing together different denominational groups including the teachers. This guarantees equality and expertise. The limitation of this model can be seen in the fact that, at least so far, it has only been realised, at a larger scale, in the shape of cooperation between Protestant and Catholic religious education and only in a few instances as cooperation between Christian and Muslim religious education.

Maybe in the end, it should again be pointed out that dialogical attitudes of teachers and students do not necessarily correspond to the different models or approaches. There seems to be a growing awareness of the need for dialogue with many religious education teachers, quite independently of the system they have to work with. Moreover, there also seems to be a new appreciation of difference, not only regarding religion, but also in many respects involved in education or society, with gender, culture, lifestyles, etc. Consequently, the most important task might not be identified at the systems level – as important as it remains – but with supporting corresponding dialogical attitudes with teachers and students.

Yet in any case, it remains true that dialogue needs difference. One way of making sure that the state school does not neglect the religious differences that continue to exist in society, is denominational religious education. In spite of all the criticisms advanced against traditional confessional religious education, denominational – cooperative and dialogical – religious education should have a place in the state schools of the future.

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