

# **Towards Comparative Research on Religious Education in Europe:**

## **Reasons - Obstacles - Methodological Considerations**

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### **Résumé**

Investigations internationales sur l'éducation religieuse en Europe n'ont guère commencées. En face du procès progressif de l'unification Européenne ils deviennent plus nécessaires. Les raisons pour l'absence des investigations comparatives sont analysées, la nécessité des telles investigations est expliquée, des perspectives methodologiques pour des investigations futures sont discutées.

### **Summary**

Comparative research on religious education in Europe is an incipient project which, however, in light of the progressive European unification, becomes more important. Reasons for the lack of comparative research are analysed, the necessity of such research is explained, methodological perspectives for future research are discussed.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Vergleichende Forschung über religiöse Erziehung in Europa steht noch ganz am Anfang, wird aber angesichts des fortschreitenden europäischen Einigungsprozesses immer notwendiger. Die Gründe für das Fehlen einer religionspädagogisch-vergleichenden Forschung in Europa werden analysiert, die Notwendigkeit einer solchen Forschung wird dargestellt, und methodologische Perspektiven für zukünftige Forschung werden erörtert.

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The starting point for the following considerations is the observation that, up to this point, comparative research on religious education in Europe is no more than an incipient project -- an enterprise with promising beginnings here and there but with no clear perspectives and without an articulate methodology on which it might be based. Given the situation of progressive (Western) European political and economic unification this lack of comparative research may be considered surprising and, in any case, it will cause problems for the future development of religious education and for the future

of religion in Europe. Without comparative research at a European level there will be no sufficient basis for the development of religious education in a unified Europe.

So in this essay I want to develop a clearer understanding of why we need what kind of comparative research on religious education in Europe. Given the scarcity or even lack of such research it seems appropriate to begin by looking into the reasons for the current situation, i.e., by examining the question why such research has not been undertaken more often and at a larger scale.

In what follows, my focus will be on questions of religious education and on research. It should be clear, however, that today, research also has to do with funding and with the willingness of European political and economic institutions beyond the university to support international research on religious education. Although in recent times the idea of "giving a soul to Europe" has gained some public and political attention, so far the intention to include research on religious education with the sponsoring tasks of the European Community seems to be at best tenuous. So my arguments in favor of such research should also be read as a plea for appropriate funding.

## 1. Reasons for the Scarcity of Comparative Research on Religious Education in Europe

It is not hard to see why we should start by looking into the reasons why comparative research on religious education has not been a vital field of study. In doing so we may come to see the difficulties and obstacles which have prevented such research from flourishing, and we may also be able to judge if these difficulties and obstacles can be overcome and what precautions will have to be taken in the future.

Obviously, a first problem to be encountered with international comparative research is terminology.<sup>124</sup> What do we mean when we speak of "religious education"? Are we referring to a school subject -- the most common meaning of the term in British English? Or are we dealing with a translation of the German "religiöse Erziehung" or "Religionspädagogik" which comprise what sometimes is called religious nurture as well as religious socialization, development, and learning? For the present purposes I will use the term religious education in the broad (German) sense of religious upbringing -- a use which corresponds more to American than to British English but which is at least possible in English as well as in German or in other European languages. In my understanding, comparative research may not be limited to a school-setting but should also extend to the family, to the congregation, to the media, to the general public, etc. In this sense, religious education is not identical with Christian education but includes all kinds of educational processes which refer to religion, be it in the sense of institutionalized religion (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, etc.) or in the sense of religion in its more open individual or cultural forms. Only if we take this

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<sup>124</sup> From a different perspective cf. G. Moran: *Religious Education as a Second Language*, Birmingham/Al. 1989.

wide horizon into consideration will it be possible to avoid the exclusion of possibly important factors or aspects of religious education.<sup>125</sup>

While we may define our terms according to our needs and while this might at least lessen the chance of misunderstandings within international communication, it should not be overlooked that, especially in the case of religious education, terminology is not coincidental or arbitrary. In many ways, the terminology which exists in different countries mirrors the history as well as the institutional and legal realities of those countries. And such realities may not be changed by academic definitions alone. So the terminological difficulties need to be kept in mind, not with the illusory hope of solving them within a research project but in order to at least keep them at bay.

Another obvious reason for the lack of comparative research is even more serious since it has to do with the nature of pertinent theories. In many cases, the theory of religious education is seen as a practical discipline, even when it is taught at the university. And there are good reasons for this understanding. A purely theoretical discipline of religious education would hardly be in a position to inform and possibly guide or refine practice. For international research, however, the close relationship between theory and a particular practice of religious education seems to have created specific difficulties. Be it that this practice is located within a school or within a congregation, most often its context is shaped by national governments or (church) administrations, and in some cases by regional or even local (sub-)structures of administration and policy-making. As a consequence, one may not expect that the analytic or constructive results which are offered by religious education theory in one context, will fit other contexts as well, especially not in other countries. Such contexts will be shaped by different institutions again on a national, regional, or local level. As a consequence, theories of religious education have tended to limit themselves to a national audience and sometimes to even smaller audiences like in the case of denominational communities of discourse or of areas defined by state legislation or by other types of sub-national legislation.

Maybe the most challenging question for international research in religious education, however, comes from the fact that there are language and culture barriers between many of the European countries. Often (even if by far not in all cases) the linguistic communities correspond to cultural communities which are shaped by a common history. In other words, the national boundaries which are marked by government, law and administration often possess some kind of deep-structure which makes for even harder differences between the various settings and situations of religious education in European countries. The traditionally very different religious situations of Catholic and Protestant countries and of (former) socialist and democratic (capitalist) countries in Eastern and Western Europe may be seen as a corollary of such differences.

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<sup>125</sup> For a more detailed description of my own views see my books: *Lebensgeschichte und Religion. Religiöse Entwicklung und Erziehung im Kindes- und Jugendalter*, München 1987; *Die Suche nach eigenem Glauben. Einführung in die Religionspädagogik des Jugendalters*, Gütersloh 1996.

These difficulties for comparative research, however, should not be considered final obstacles. As can be seen from the more established examples of comparative research in political science and comparative sociology but also in general education where comparative approaches have attained considerable status, comparative international research remains challenging and sometimes messy but obviously it can still be done in a fruitful manner if there is enough motive for such research. So maybe the most important point is to show what reasons there might be for religious education theory and research to widen their horizons towards international comparisons.

## 2. Reasons for Comparative Research on Religious Education in Europe

The most general case for comparative research on religious education in Europe may be built on the widespread impression that the new challenges of today's world can obviously not be dealt with in traditional ways alone. In relation to religious education, such new challenges may be observed with individual persons being faced with the sometimes overwhelming complexities of modern or postmodern life. They may also be experienced by societies facing the challenges of multicultural and multireligious developments. And they may be felt by religious communities which, in many countries, suffer from plural contexts which seem to threaten their future existence. While the feeling that new ideas and new approaches are needed in religious education, is spreading and while this feeling often goes along with an intuitive impression that the new challenges are related to international influences, we nevertheless have to build a more careful argument if we want to show what benefits we might expect from international research. In the remainder of this section I therefore want to describe four reasons which speak for such research.

First, contemporary social analysts speak of the internationalization of culture and life.<sup>126</sup> With modernization as a common influence at least with western countries, culture and all forms of life in these countries have tended to follow similar patterns, especially in respect to religion. Pluralization, individualization, and privatization are considered the main tendencies in the modernization of religion. More recently, the discussion on postmodernity and on globalization have taken over these descriptions, sometimes radicalizing them and sometimes adding some explanatory aspects -- most often in the sense of an even deeper relativization of religious traditions and world-views but, in some cases, also in reference to a new public role which religion might have to play for the global future.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> The latest examples come from the discussion on globalization, for summary statements cf. M. Waters: *Globalization*, London/ New York 1995, U. Beck: *Was ist Globalisierung? Irrtümer des Globalismus - Antworten auf Globalisierung*, Frankfurt/M. 1997.

<sup>127</sup> U. Beck/ A. Giddens/ S. Lash: *Reflexive Modernization*, Cambridge 1994, P. Beyer: *Religion and Globalization*, London 1994, J. Casanova: *Public Religions in*

What does this mean for research on religious education? We may at least hypothesize that international developments call for international approaches. If we want to discern what is due to a general (for instance, "western") pattern of cultural development we will have to look at the patterns in different countries and compare them with one another. This view is supported by the success of international value-studies which have been conducted repeatedly.<sup>128</sup> This research should now be extended to religious education, empirically as well as conceptually.

Second, we have to take into account the processes of economic and political cooperation and unification which further strengthen the more general process of internationalization. Within Europe, the most influential process of this type goes on with the European Community. Again, this community is, first of all, an economic and, from now on, in part, a monetary community. While there are no provisions for a European Office of Education which could replace the respective government structures at the national level, there will still be consequences for education. It is not hard to see that the European Community will exert more and more direct and indirect influences on educational processes and decisions, and that this will have many implications for religious education as well. So it becomes mandatory for religious education theory to expand its scope beyond its traditional national limits. If, for example, this theory is to inform church leaders and politicians in their policy-making and decision-finding it will have to develop and to formulate arguments which are based on experiences and requirements in more than only one of the European countries.

Third, building on the first two arguments we may hypothesize that the emerging internationalization and Europeanization make it possible to literally learn from each other in the field of religious education. As the situations and challenges become more similar, it also becomes more likely that models of religious education may in fact be exported from one country to another, at least in a modified form. In addition to this, religious education theory will take on the shape of a body of knowledge which necessarily includes factual information as well as conceptual analyses from several countries. This is not to say that religious education theory could or should ever become a discipline of cumulative knowledge like, for example, the medical field where the development of a new type of medication which helps against a certain virus, more or less immediately leads to the international adaptation of this medication. But it may certainly be true that, compared to past periods of national or regional seclusion, religious education theory clearly becomes more cumulative in its knowledge production.

Fourth, internationalization and a unified Europe presuppose intercultural learning at many levels. Comparative research on religious education may itself be considered a possibility of such learning -- a possibility which should not be underestimated since, in many ways, it is education through which national cultures are transmitted to future

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the Modern World, Chicago/ London 1994, R. Robertson/ W.R. Garrett (eds.): Religion and Global Order, New York 1991.

<sup>128</sup> R. Inglehart: Kultureller Umbruch. Wertwandel in der westlichen Welt, Frankfurt/M./ New York 1995 (= Cultural Change, Princeton 1989).

generations. In the case of religious education, this argument receives additional plausibility from the existence of explicit concepts of intercultural learning within religious education itself, i.e., from the concepts of ecumenical and interreligious education.<sup>129</sup>

In sum, it seems to me that there are good reasons for comparative research on religious education in Europe today. Therefore, we may claim that the future of religious education, and then also of religion and society in general, will at least in part depend on the successful internationalization of religious education theory and research.

### **3. How Comparative Research on Religious Education in Europe May Be Done: Methodological Considerations**

In this final section, I will not attempt to summarize the available literature on our topic. I am not even sure if such a summary can be formulated at this point since it would presuppose a careful and extensive survey on the literature in many different countries which, at least to my knowledge, does not exist. It will certainly be an important preliminary task to put together a comprehensive bibliography which includes all items of explicit as well as implicit comparative interest in respect to religious education in Europe. For the time being, I will limit myself to the German literature and to giving a few examples of what kind of publications and studies I have in mind.

While the importance of preliminary bibliographical work is obvious, the methodology for future research certainly is not. Therefore it seems helpful to describe a number of different possible procedures or approaches which may be used in this kind of work. Given this interest, I will distinguish five possible approaches to comparative research on religious education in Europe, and I will attempt to point out their methodological implications.

First, there is the possibility of what might be called European policy construction for religious education. The task here is to develop guidelines for political decisions concerning religious education which are based on the shared expertise of religious education specialists from European countries. A good example is the 1990 Loccum Memorandum<sup>130</sup> which sets forth European perspectives for (religious) education based on a conference of the Religious Education Institute at Loccum/Germany and the Intereuropean Commission on Church and School (ICCS). Yet this conference and the

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<sup>129</sup> K. Goßmann/ H. Schultze (ed.): *Ökumenisches Lernen im Religionsunterricht europäischer Schulen*, Münster: Comenius-Institut 1988, K. Goßmann/ A. Pithan/ P. Schreiner (eds.): *Zukunftsfähiges Lernen? Herausforderungen für Ökumenisches Lernen in Schule und Unterricht*, Münster: Comenius-Institut 1995; J.A. van der Ven/ H.-G. Ziebertz (eds.): *Religiöser Pluralismus und interreligiöses Lernen*, Kampen/ Weinheim 1994.

<sup>130</sup> *Europäische Perspektiven für Bildung und Erziehung. Loccumer Memorandum 1990. Beiträge der Theologie zur Bildung. Eine Herausforderung für Europa*. In: J. Ohlemacher (ed.): *Religion und Bildung in Europa. Herausforderungen - Chancen - Erfahrungen*, Göttingen 1991, 241-245.

resulting memorandum also are indicative of the unsolved problems of this approach. Neither are today's theories of religious education in a position to offer a sound basis for judging European policies by criteria which would be based on a truly Europe-wide understanding, nor is there a unified and representative association of religious education which could claim to speak for all of Europe. ICCS is only one such association, and it is not obvious to the outsider (and to the politician) what it really stands for. It will therefore be a theoretical as well as a practical and political task to develop policy criteria of European scope which might then also be adopted by religious education associations across the board.<sup>131</sup>

The methodology for this kind of work will probably have to come from political science and from sociology. At the interface between religious education and European politics, questions of democratization and of cultural participation might play a crucial role. In addition, legal issues will have to be dealt with, for example, concerning the relationship between state and religion in different European political and legal traditions as well as in different denominations and religions.

Second, there is a common European history of religious education to be uncovered. Such a common history may certainly be identified for the Latin authors of the Middle Ages but it also exists at later times. The philosophers and theologians of education at the time of the Reformation (Luther, Calvin, Bucer, Erasmus, etc.) often were of considerable international orientation and influence. Their conversations did not stop at what borders where in existence them. The same is true for the reformers of the 17th Century like Jan Amos Comenius who, in addition, led a truly European life between several countries where he lived and worked, exerting much influence on the reconstruction of education in some of those countries. The international scope of the German Pietists is well known and so is their influence on the Moravians and their worldwide educational impact. With the Enlightenment, figures like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi gave a new shape to religious education in many European countries (and beyond).

While it is easy to trace the international impact of such classics, the common history of religious education in Europe becomes less visible during the last two centuries. This is the time of the nation-state, and it also is the time of modern academic research which brought about a different situation for international contact and exchange. Yet even for this period we may expect, or at least hypothesize, parallel developments in religious education -- be it through the influence of thinkers like, for example, Johann Friedrich Herbart, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and many others who stand for major international developments, or be it through personal contact and exchange between individual religious education theorists. So far, little work has been done to uncover this common history. Yet it seems clear that its reconstruction would

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<sup>131</sup> For a good beginning see P. Schreiner/ H. Spinder/ F. Vos (eds.): *Education and Europe/ Bildung und Europa. Common statement and informations/ Gemeinsame Erklärung und Informationen*. A publication of ICCS/ ECCE/ EFTRE/ IV, Münster/ Utrecht 1995.

not only be of interest for historians but could also inform today's understanding of religious education within the perspective of a common heritage.

Third, international exchange which is stimulating and mutually enriching, has been possible around specific issues of general interest. Typically, these are issues which play a similar role in religious education with a number of different countries. Examples for this approach may be seen in European consultations on interreligious and intercultural learning, on (religious) education and ecology, on the study and teaching of world religions,<sup>132</sup> or on the religious education of youth in European countries.<sup>133</sup> So far, the format which was chosen for this exchange may generally be described as two- or three-day-conferences, with publication of the conference papers following the consultation, possibly in several languages. Only rarely, however, has it been possible to conduct special research on which the exchange could be based. For example, there are no (empirical) studies which would compare the teaching of world religions in several countries according to the practical implementation of teaching approaches, materials, classroom-interaction, or the actual results of teaching and learning. So while this issue-related approach recommends itself because of its concreteness, there remains much to be done in order to improve the research basis for international exchange.

Fourth, at a more general level, international exchange between researchers and theorists of religious education, as it takes place, for example, within the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV) or the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT) typically at bi-annual conferences, seems to amount to something like an international or European phenomenology of approaches, methods, strategies, research topics, etc. This approach clearly leads to an enriched understanding of the possible scope of religious education theory as can be seen by the number of colleagues who have shown a sustained interest in such international conferences.<sup>134</sup> By itself, however, such exchange does not lead to systematic insights, for example, into the structure and methodology of this discipline. As to my knowledge, no successful attempts have been made to systematically address, at an international level, questions which concern, among others, the quality standards of religious education,

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<sup>132</sup> As can be seen from the following publications, the Comenius-Institute has played an important role in organizing such consultations and in publishing their results: A. Brown/ K. Goßmann (eds.): *Fundamental Conditions for the Studies of World Religions*, Münster: Comenius-Institut 1989, T. Andree/ C. Bakker/ P. Schreiner (eds.): *Crossing Boundaries. Contributions to Interreligious and Intercultural Education*, Münster: Comenius-Institut 1997, K. Goßmann/ P. Schreiner (eds.): *Religionsunterricht und Ökologie. Der Beitrag der Weltreligionen zur Umwelterziehung in der Schule*, Münster: Comenius-Institut 1993.

<sup>133</sup> U. Nembach (ed.): *Jugend - 2000 Jahre nach Jesus. Jugend und Religion in Europa II*, Frankfurt/M. etc. 1996.

<sup>134</sup> Also cf. the related journals Panorama. International Journal of Comparative Religious Education and Values and International Journal of Practical Theology.



the preferential forms of study and training in this field, the methods of research, the specific validity problems, etc. So again, much remains to be done in the future if religious education as an academic discipline or subdiscipline is to gain a more defined shape, with standards to be insisted on and with results to be taken seriously within the academic world as well as within the general public.

Fifth, the probably most complex and demanding approach may be described as reconstruction of the development of religious education theory and praxis in different countries against the backdrop of social modernization. This approach corresponds to what has been said above concerning the internationalization of culture and life within the process of social modernization, postmodernity, and globalization. The central question to be answered here is how religious education in different countries has responded to the (presumably) parallel challenges posed by this process. The idea is not to simply evaluate approaches of religious education by judging them on the basis of how much they have, or have not, adapted themselves to modernization -- this would mean to make a process which itself is subject to much critical discussion, the ultimate norm of religious education. Rather, the idea is to find a common frame of reference which can bring different theories of religious education from various international contexts into a meaningful conversation with each other.

In my own work, I have tried, together with my American colleague Richard Osmer of Princeton Theological Seminary,<sup>135</sup> to use such a model of comparative research for gaining a new understanding of the development of religious education in Germany and in the United States during the 20th Century. Posing the process of social modernization as a backdrop against which this development may be seen has proven an interesting basis for comparisons. At the same time it has become clear that we are not only dealing with general international processes which would be just the same in all countries. We are also dealing with the concrete histories peculiar to each country. The same probably holds true for European countries. While they have gone through parallel processes of modernization they have also experienced their particular historical situations. If we want to understand the development of religious education in European countries, we will have to keep both of these contexts in mind -- the context of modernization in general and the context of national history in particular.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article is a plea for making comparative research on religious education in Europe a major focus of future academic work and of European sponsoring. The difficulties of this kind of research which have been described above, should not keep us from proceeding in this direction. Many of those difficulties are exactly the ones which also are encountered by the general process of European unification. As we learn to become

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<sup>135</sup> R.R. Osmer/ F. Schweitzer: Religious Education Reform Movements in the United States and in Germany as a Paradigmatic Response to Modernization. In: International Journal of Practical Theology 1 (1997), 227-254.

citizens of a more international world we should also learn to become more international in our research and teaching. Religion and, more specifically, Christianity has much to contribute to a truly humane international community -- through the religious and Christian traditions but also through religious education.