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Mapping as a Task for International Knowledge Transfer in Religious Education (research). An approach from a Swiss Perspective

Jasmine Suhner and Thomas Schlag

Abstract

This article first describes the diverse stakeholders in religion-related subjects in Switzerland. The diversity-related challenges and tasks described in the Swiss context are then correlated with the corresponding local and international (international) knowledge transfer challenges. International knowledge transfer require a meaningful classification of the associated questions, teaching models and research projects. The Swiss research project discussed in this paper proposes such an approach. The project developed a theoretical, practical grid that could be a valuable starting point for mapping an (inter-)religious education model, and provides some insights into current religious education research. The article concludes with a plea for increased religion-related and theological interdisciplinarity in theory and practice.

Keywords: international knowledge transfer; classification, mapping, (inter-)religious education; diverse stakeholders; Switzerland

Introduction

This paper first discusses two different perspectives on diversity. The first perspective is related to the diverse, complex, socio-political challenges the world has been facing at the beginning of the third millennium, such as geopolitical conflicts and economic and environmental crises, all of which have been inescapably manifested at individual, societal and global levels. Globalization and digitalization have led to a plurality of values and social frictions that political efforts toward stronger integration and inclusion measures have been unable to fully counteract. Therefore, what is needed are personal, mindful, socially and globally conscious values. One example of an *education-related* supranational project is the OECD Learning Framework 2030, the central learning goals of which focus on the knowledge, social and emotional skills and reflective attitudes and values needed to enable young people to be global change agents (OECD, 2018, p. 4).

In line with these social and value-related dynamics and the corresponding skills, there have also been associated demands for the development of (inter)religious, culturally sensitive and worldview education both *reactively*, such as the inclusion of multi-religious, pastoral or political thinking), and *proactively* by exploring how religion-related and worldview education could respond to and *act on* social crises.1

When people live according to religious and worldview convictions, be they religious, transreligious or areligious, these convictions can either positively or negatively shape social standards and public spaces. However, we are convinced that meaningful, multi-perspective, theologically mindful, religious worldview education can promote knowledge, reflection, development and a common good-oriented approach to religion, religiosity and spirituality. Therefore, there is significant potential for religious-related education to be a force for societal transformation.

The second perspective is related to the diversity in the different religion-related and (inter-) religious education models. Recent decades have seen wide theological, religious and pedagogical debates on the appropriate didactic approaches to religion-related education by people involved in education policy, intercultural or human rights education and other disciplines.2

However, the question remains; what relevant, constructive contributions can religion-related education make to deal with the crises confronting the world? Specifically, which didactic approaches, what orientations, with whom and for how long should religious education research projects or religion-related subjects be implemented, and what effects, challenges and insights can be gained from them? To ensure valuable insights, empirical research into the different respective educational contexts and exchanges of knowledge and experience between the numerous actors, disciplines, contexts and levels are needed.

First, the stakeholder diversity associated with religion-related subjects in Switzerland is discussed. Then, the diversity-related challenges and tasks in the Swiss context are correlated with the corresponding (international) knowledge transfer challenges and tasks in local and

¹ Subsequently, we shall use the term "religious education" to make the link to related denominational and interdenominational debates on religious education. We also use the term "religion-related education/subject" as an umbrella category for all subjects and subject groups that explicitly address religious issues one way or the other.

² At the level of politics and education policy, numerous official documents do refer to the religious education contribution to HRE. The OSCE, for instance, has been leading fundamental discussions on the relevance of public religious education from the 1970s onwards. The 'Toledo Guiding Principles' explicitly call for the integration of religious education in democracy education and HRE (OSCE & ODIHR, 2007; Richardson, 2015). Comparable recommendations also exist on the part of the Council of Europe, among them: 'Recommendation on religious tolerance' (1993), or 'State, religion, secularity and human rights' (2007) (Schreiner, 2016).

supranational spheres and an approach discussed on how international knowledge research and practice transfer can result in a meaningful classification of questions, teaching models and research projects. A Swiss research project that exemplifies such an approach is then discussed. The project developed a theoretical, practical grid that could be a good starting point for mapping an (inter-)religious education model. Exemplary insights and reflections on current religious education research are then proposed. The article concludes with a plea for increased religion-related, theological theory and in-practice interdisciplinarity and continued dialogue between political, educational and scientific stakeholders (4).

1. Stakeholder diversity in religion-related education: a Swiss perspective

In Switzerland, the national public education content, subjects and basic orientation have been recently reconceptualized, the largely secular education policy framework for which in German-speaking Switzerland is the "Lehrplan 21" (Curriculum 21). Curriculum 21 is skills-oriented and standardizes the compulsory schooling curricula in all German-speaking and bilingual Swiss cantons. The Curriculum 21 framework places religion in a subject group called "Ethics, Religions, Community" (Ethik, Religionen, Gemeinschaft, ERG for short), which is a separate subject within the subject group "Nature-Human-Society" (Natur, Mensch, Gesellschaft, NMG for short), which is an overall term for the natural sciences, humanities and social sciences (Helbling, 2015). Therefore, religion in this context is publicly relevant educational content that is explored in conjunction with "ethics" and "community." "Unlike other religious competence models, it [the ERG model] does not intend to foster personal religiosity" (Helbling & Kilchsperger 2013, p. 58).

The ERG orientation reflects the increasing worldview heterogeneity in teachers and learners and a strong alignment with the negative religious freedom principle. Public religious education in Switzerland must comply with this principle, which means that personal religious convictions cannot be the starting point nor the goal for any concrete teaching. Therefore, how can the heterogeneity in religion-related teaching, learning and questioning be activated in ERG lessons to raise awareness of religious differences and the associated exclusion and marginalization dynamics that occur because of religious attitudes? (Suhner & Schlag, 2021, p.185).

The inclusion of ERG means that for the first time, the study of religion has become a regular part of Swiss public education, indicating that there is acceptance of the public significance of religion, open reflections on public religious didactics and basic and further education available for RE teachers. However, it remains unclear as to who is responsible for the specific shaping

of the didactic possibilities and the development and publication of the ERG teaching materials, teacher training and reference sciences.

Parallel to ERG and depending on the canton or municipality, Christian religious education is also being provided in many places as an optional subject in schools or on church premises. In some places, Jewish and/or Islamic religious education is also provided.

Given these recent (educational) policy developments, it is clear that there is increasing diversity in religious education stakeholders and by extension, religious education research. The many religious education stakeholders, discussions and questions in Switzerland have led to a complexity that is truly challenging for religious educators and interested outsiders.

2. Mapping as a challenge and the international religious education knowledge transfer task

The complex religious education dynamism has meant that the Religious Education content and associated guiding paradigms need to adapt to this new religious sociology. However, the people responsible for developing the curricula today may not necessarily be there tomorrow (in Switzerland, the new curriculum from 2023 onwards for ERG teachers in Zurich has recently been designed almost exclusively by religious studies)3. In short, what is considered state-of-the-art today may no longer apply tomorrow. Of course, such dynamism is not new; however, the speed at which it is manifesting is unprecedented, which means that an efficient, flexible exchange of knowledge between religious education stakeholders is vital to dealing with this complex situation, as commented on by Friedrich Schweitzer and Peter Schreiner: "While accounts of the practice of religious education in different countries have become available (mostly concerning religious education as a school subject but, in some instances, also concerning non-formal religious education), the same is not true for religious education as a field of research in different countries. Mapping the religious education research scene in Europe (and beyond) could therefore be a first important task in advancing international knowledge transfer in this field." (Schweitzer & Schreiner, 2020, p. 13).

In the Swiss context specifically, this signifies that even in a comparatively manageable landscape, the mapping challenge must embrace the "diverse relationships and transfer processes" within the country, which in turn are closely related to the "production, exchange, dissemination and reception of knowledge (...) as historical processes" (Schweitzer & Schreiner 2020, p. 13). For example, influenced by France, there is no religious education in

³ The new curriculum is currently in a pilot phase, its publication is forthcoming.

schools in the Swiss cantons of Geneva and Neuchâtel because of the specific orientation in this French-speaking part of Switzerland toward a strongly secular understanding of the relationship between church and state (Lorenzen & Schmid, 2019). In comparison, until a few decades ago, the German-speaking part of Switzerland had strong cooperation between the state and the church, which was also applied to public religious education (Büttgen, Roggenkamp & Schlag 2017; Schlag, Roggenkamp & Büttgen 2020).

Sensible and useful knowledge transfer mapping requires that each stakeholder, each project and each educational module be suitably differentiated, which requires a commonly agreement on multidimensional categorization that applies to the diverse didactics. There are four aspects to which knowledge transfer must pay particular attention (based on the following fourfold differentiation, cf. Suhner 2022):

- a) The mapping of the diverse but (all too often) individually designed religious education processes and projects, be they implicit or explicit, would counteract the major problem in religion-related education, that is, the loss of specialist knowledge and the randomness of contact between active professionals. This would be possible through the option of a mapping based on clearer (self-)reflection and (self-)positioning and a purposeful linking with the same or opposed projects. We refer to this aspect as a conscious "professional knowledge transfer" for the following reason. Due to the very different (professional biographical, educational, denominational, etc.) backgrounds of the academic actors in the religious education field, cross-border knowledge transfers have often implicitly occurred, which has also made them difficult to identify and describe (Schlag 2020). Our first aspect therefore focuses on "conscious and explicit knowledge transfer."
- b) At present, specific knowledge transfer from the experience gained from transferring educational offers from the analog to the digital realm have become increasingly relevant. This also applies to offers and projects that from the outset were conceived as purely digital/hybrid—be they proposed by institutions or by private individuals. We call this aspect "knowledge transfer between analog-hybrid/digital actors."
- c) Further, we see an advantage in mapping to gain better potential insights into formal, non-formal and informal learning settings and the respective forms of knowledge exchange in these settings (Schlag 2019). Such corresponding knowledge complementarity is explicitly demanded, not least by the OECD, in the context of "lifelong learning": "The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is an important means for making the 'lifelong learning for all' agenda a reality for all and,

- subsequently, for reshaping learning to better match the needs of the 21st-century knowledge economies and open societies. "(OECD 2010) We refer to this aspect as "knowledge transfer between formal/non-formal/learning settings."
- d) Finally, we see that "knowledge transfer at different levels," namely at personal, local, societal and global levels as a challenge. While an awareness of the interplay between these different action levels is a given, it has recently acquired greater visibility in recent educational contexts, such as in the "OECD Learning Framework 2030" quoted above. A distinction between attitudes and values is made for "personal, local, societal and global" learning: "The use of this broader range of knowledge and skills will be mediated by attitudes and values (e.g., motivation, trust, respect for diversity and virtue). The attitudes and values can be observed at personal, local, societal and global levels" (OECD 2018, p. 5). This knowledge transfer between the different levels takes on an even greater significance when the following is considered:
 - when private individuals provide educational offers, either digitally or in hybrid forms, which professional educational actors must be considered;
 - in times of increasing citizen science research, such as the journal "Citizen Science in Theory and Practice");
 - finally, in times when the classic dividing lines between "non-professional" and "professional" tend to be increasingly fluid in all domains (cf. Cross & Swart 2020).

We could, of course, further differentiate additional aspects, which here are considered to be the mapping of (international) knowledge transfer that would provide the most benefits to the relevant actors. In particular, a continuously adaptable mapping could provide an enriching scientific exchange for these four challenges. Even if the respective contextual, that is, historically grown, institutionally established and politically determined framework conditions for religious education may differ in individual countries, the above-mentioned societal challenges could still be easily compared because of global developments and evolving religious demographics. In Europe, for example, there are similar, dynamic, changing religious identity values and logic across borders (van der Noll et al 2018; Gobel et al 2018).

Finally, mapping is more relevant than ever for religious education research, not only in the above-mentioned respects but also because of the transformative, societal and labor developments. The accelerating and decisive changes in the work environment (Bergmann 2019) has led to a diversification in professional biographical paths, with career changers and dropouts becoming the norm; therefore, the need for "knowledge transfer between (job)

generations" becomes even more important. Digitalization has also opened many new *possibilities* for the presenting, sharing and further development of dynamic mapping to allow for communication beyond existing national, religious and disciplinary borders.

3. KIAL: A Swiss research project and a first mapping

If systematic international knowledge transfer is possible, it is necessary to have differentiated mapping for research and practice. Therefore, the mapping needs to be based on differentiated, abstract categories that can be applied to different theoretical and practical religious education contexts.

A possible point of departure for this type of mapping was developed as part of a Swiss research project⁴ focused on interreligious learning, which, depending on the angle chosen, entails either a broadening or a narrowing of the general religion-based education perspective. The interreligious perspective developed in a predominantly Christian environment could inspire the following remarks. However, first, the research project is briefly discussed, after which the heuristic-analytical grid for mapping religious education efforts, offers and projects is discussed.

3.1 Background: the foundation of the Competence Center for Interreligious Learning in Initial and Continuing Teacher Education (KIAL)

In 2017, the Competence Center for Interreligious Learning in Teacher Education (KIAL) was founded at the University of Teacher Education, St. Gallen (Switzerland) (PHSG) in cooperation with the Faculty of Theology at the University of Zurich. The KIAL aims to close the gap between practice ("experts by experience") and the theoretical research conducted in various interreligious learning disciplines, such as pedagogy, theology, religious studies and other related disciplines.

One of the main aims of KIAL is to consciously initiate, design and develop interreligious learning processes. However, to do so, it is necessary to first *perceive* the differentiations in the interreligious learning processes and determine the most meaningful system for such perceptions and categorizations. In the interests of international knowledge transfer, this need to develop a categorization system can be linked to the "mapping" topic.

⁴ The following remarks in Chapter 3 are part of Suhner's research work and her habilitation, which is currently in progress. More detailed information can be found in the research report Suhner & Winter, 2022 (open access).

First, a summary is given of the qualitative-explorative interreligious learning study that was conducted within the KIAL framework. The following sections outline the research approach and process; subsection 3.2 elaborates on some of the findings; subsection 3.3 places these findings in the larger mapping context; and chapter 4 concludes with an outlook and a plea.

Research approach and process

Design-based research was chosen because it combines application, theory-based and knowledge-oriented research, which was deemed suitable for increasing the innovative performances of teaching-learning research and gaining insights into the specific practical context of teaching-learning processes.

The research design involved both qualitative surveys and analytical methods. A hypothesistesting research design with standardized impact measurements and pre-post comparisons of two mean values after the successful implementation of the respective design measure was not chosen because of a lack of resources and because the individual interreligious learning construction processes are so complex that it is difficult to prospectively represent them using suitable variable sets. Therefore, impact assumptions were made based on the qualitative data obtained in the first cycle from the learning process analysis to reveal and reconstruct the possible connections.

The data were collected using semi-structured guided interviews conducted with small groups of student teachers. The group interview audio recordings were transcribed and coded using a multi-stage computer-assisted analytical process and a coding scheme was developed based on the interview transcripts.

Following the pre-test result evaluation, a questionnaire was developed to supplement the guided interviews in further iterations.

Two components were initially determined for the differentiated interreligious learning processes based on the learner's self-perception of the learning processes. However, these were "sensitizing concepts" rather than static components (Kluge & Kelle 2010), that is, they were heuristic-analytical concepts5:

concepts and theoretical categories, in fact, they need a certain theoretical perspective to recognise thematically relevant data. Only a theoryguided qualitative approach ensures that the features and categories structuring the empirical analysis are insightful for the research question. Therefore, the used theoretical concepts must be "heuristically useful". In this respect, sensitising concepts serve as heuristic-analytical concepts.

⁵ The reason that "sensitising concepts" was used was that even though the development of categories and concepts does not take place before data collection, based on collected material, the researcher has prior knowledge. Empirical generalisations and theoretical statements do not simply "emerge" from the data material. Researchers always see the reality of their empirical field through the "lenses" of pre-existing

1. The first interreligious skills component focuses on educational content. The sensitizing concept guiding this component followed a pragmatic decision: in the basic ERG module, the PHSG was designed to work with the "Sachbuch Religion" (fact book on religion) and the religion dimensions it mentions (Bühler et al. 2015, p. 22 and 26); intellectual-ideological, ethical-social, ritual, institutional, aesthetic and psychoemotional-body-soul. These religious dimensions overlap with the interreligious learning dimensions, as exemplified by Stefan Leimgruber (Leimgruber 2007). (Figure 1)

***** Insert graphic 1 here *****

Figure 1: The six dimensions for religion-related educational content (adapted from: Bühler et al., 2015, 22 and 26)

2. The focus of the second interreligious skills component was the learners: how they perceived and assimilated, processed and potentially elaborated on the educational content. Here the systematic approach suggested by Karlo Meyer was the basis. Meyer's differentiated meta-analysis arrived at a four-part scheme that conclusively classified a majority of the interreligious learning models commonly discussed in professional debates (Meyer 2019, p. 178). Meyer distinguished four "modes of accessing religions" ("Religionenerschließungsmodi"): exploratory, the stimulation of existential reflection, the activation that shapes encounters and the activation of local engagement. (Figure 2)

***** Insert graphic 2 here *****

Figure 2: The four modes for accessing religions (based on Meyer 2019, p. 178, wording translated and adapted) 6

⁶ The four modes of accessing religions are written in the medio-passive tense in Meyer's German-language diagram: "The students let themselves be activated to" (Meyer 2019, p. 178).

The collected data materials were analyzed based on the two sensitizing concepts. Subsequently, the interviews were openly and inductively coded again. Therefore, three rounds took place (each of which was multi-layered, that is, the coding was discussed, checked, or compared with others who had co-coded some sections on a trial basis). These diverse compilations were in turn reflected upon based on theory to determine the appropriate religious education categories.

Overall, this qualitative-explorative study allowed for an approach that took account of the voices of student teachers; their self-perception, their learning perceptions and their reception of the educational content. The study results are not detailed here. Instead, we want to focus on the category grid that emerged from the study, which could, in principle, be applied beyond the specific interreligious contexts to any religious education context (denominational, multi-religious as well as other religion-related).

3.2 A sketch of the findings: mapping the interreligious learning processes

While the six dimensions of religion offered some illuminating insights for the heuristic-analytical grid, overall, they were of limited use. This was primarily because the corresponding classifications often overlapped in the learners' statements and their *practical* descriptions. Overall, the *sensitizing concept* for the "modes of accessing religions" mentioned above provided much more nuanced insights into the character and perceptions prevailing in the interreligious learning processes, which was how clearer possibilities, differentiations and gradations emerged during the coding process, with the latter providing considerable added value, which was then fed back into the theoretical debate.

The two *sensitizing concepts* originally had six and four categories, with the second concept being differentiated by the data collection, evaluation and interpretation conducive to further research in religion-related subject didactics. These results were even more interesting because the four modes for accessing religions emerged from a *meta-analysis of theoretical approaches* to interreligious learning. These modes *proved* to be commensurate with *practical application*, which means that within KIAL's framework, these four modes could be *further developed* in the form of sub-codes *through sub-modes*.7 The resulting grid shown in Figure 3 consisted of abstract categories.

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⁷ Not all subcodes can be explained here. For this we refer to Suhner/Winter 2022.

***** Insert graphic 3 here *****

Figure 3: Simplified KIAL category grid (Suhner/Winter 2022)

The categories mentioned here are by no means exhaustive and are only a "work-in-progress" illustration of the interreligious learning process perceptions at the PHSG. The original six dimensions of religion (educational content dimensions) were categorized as "subject-based research" in five dimensions. The subcategories were tentatively organized in relation to each other to make sense of the content. For example, indirect encounter learning was placed close to the educational content dimensions, and personal language ability was positioned opposite dialogue ability to indicate a proximity or a connection within the grid. Additional subcategories on top of those already identified here have since emerged. However, the more differentiation, the greater the need for further examination. The grid needs to be expanded in a three- or even four-dimensional direction to accommodate the different actors and levels. This explains why its presentation in an analogous publication is insufficient.

3.3 The KIAL Grid: a way to extend and enrich communication and cooperation in religious education research

This heuristic-analytical grid provides a possible starting point for differentiated mapping approaches to (inter-)religious education and the development of concrete teaching materials. Based on four modes and subcategories that emerged during the research process a more nuanced and sophisticated spider diagram could be developed for *every* (inter-)religious education research project, educational process and teaching material. This theoretically founded category grid, which has since been further developed in practice, religious education projects of any kind can be meaningfully related to each other, compared and put in contact. A comprehensive "map" of interreligious education activities for different actors and areas could be developed or further selective, quantitative and comparative research conducted. Overall, as this grid provides a self-orientation to and an articulation of religious education and religious didactics, it can stimulate communication and cooperation between different models and research projects.

Therefore, this framework serves a macro-level function for religious education theory and research and practical level reflection. It could also be a useful meso-level didactic visualization for religion-related discourses, such as teaching materials and content selection. Finally, the framework could serve as a guide for students at the micro-level to assist them to focus on their (learning) perspectives or goals.

Overall, the framework provides for a self-orientation and articulation of public religious education and didactics, allows for related reference disciplines to be situated, which could encourage mutual communication and cooperation and comprehensively emphasize the complexity-oriented, interconnected thinking needed for lifelong learning.

The KIAL category grid also provides directions for further research, especially into digitalization. Once digitalized, a corresponding application could be provided as a low-threshold tool to all relevant actors. In the digital space, it could also be interesting to use emojis or other visual or symbolic illustrations in the surveys as the data and insights gained from such an approach could, after being tested in a variety of practice contexts, assist in further refining and differentiating the category grid. It could also be used to map interreligious education providers or compare context-specific interreligious learning process insights.

The medium-term goal is to further differentiate the mapping grid. A comprehensive category platform based on theory and practice could be developed that facilitates specific links and interconnections - in short: knowledge transfers - from different perspectives and professional or conflicting contexts. The research project "Interreligious Challenges and interreligious learning in Digital Society," which is part of the University Research Program (URPP) "Digital Religion(s)" at the University of Zurich started in 2021, is working toward this very goal.8

4. Plea for increased collaborative interdisciplinary knowledge management

Due to the religious education developments and challenges, such as the complexity of topics, the dynamics of the educational policy conditions, the plurality of contexts and the interconnectedness of the political, theological, social and pedagogical challenges, religious education stakeholder cooperation and collaboration is expected to play an increasingly important role. The different religious education actors, the many reference sciences and the

⁸ www.digitalreligions.uzh.ch

supranational horizon all call for continued professional exchanges, communication and the development of future intra-, inter- and transdisciplinary scenarios.9

Given our specific professional, institutional and personal backgrounds as theologians dealing with the theory and practice of religious education, the following should be noted for interdisciplinary work. A theological perspective on religion-related school subjects does not seem to suggest a link to a denominational orientation. When training teachers in many European countries, theological faculties or training institutions that have clear denominational anchoring are no longer fully responsible. However, knowledge transfers related to future religion-related and interreligious educational process designs require a clear reference to theologies and other related areas, such as the philosophy and psychology of religions (Suhner 2021, 185-211). Even if the framework conditions in individual countries require a nonconfessional school subject design, simply ignoring the theologies would obviate the specific historical, hermeneutical and pedagogical knowledge values. A teaching practice that primarily favors a knowledge-oriented, informative profile is expected for religious education teacher education; however, as is already evident in Switzerland, these developments could lead to the loss of the sub-field "religion" in the ERG subject personal references to respective existential (religious and further) questions and content.

In contrast, we consider theological perspectives beyond the confessional and institutional research and practice aspects to be a better approach to the challenges posed by factual religious diversity. The factual diversity of religious traditions, the historical developments, the epistemological approaches and the current ethically relevant interpretations of religious practice can be brought into concrete teaching processes in a (meta-)theologically informed and dialogue-oriented way that considers both the thematization of religions and worldview content and convictions. Therefore, the knowledge transfer is a "professional knowledge transfer" that fosters increased theological exchanges between researchers in different countries.

Against the backdrop of increased religious plurality, intense discussions are needed on the approaches that could be used to address the current interreligious practice challenges in schools to allow for a conscious dialogue between the different theologies.

The question regarding the political, educational, scientific or practical disciplinary responsibilities could certainly gain some clarity from a mapping that illustrates which

⁹ For the concept of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity we refer to the ongoing research project "SHAPE-ID": an EU-funded project addressing the challenge of improving inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation, and especially to the report Baptista et al. 2020.

disciplines, under which conditions, with which challenges and containing which topics, etc., contribute to religion-related educational tasks.

Irrespective of the disciplinary responsibilities, there remain collaborative and cooperative challenges between religious educational actors. Therefore, some mapping is necessary to generate collaboration beyond personal contacts. Of course, any mapping by researchers must constantly question the respective categories as these are contextually colored and shaped by power 10 Such religious education mapping and its limitations must also be theologically and critically questioned, which is a meaningful task for theologians.

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¹⁰ Cf. e.g., Baumann & Tunger-Zanetti 2018.

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