

“Didactics of the question” as an approach to dealing with truth claims in RE

Why the Swiss model of non-denominational RE can be a source of inspiration for international knowledge transfer

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1. Introduction

What makes the Swiss context of RE and the recent and ongoing debates about it interesting and inspirational for the academic and practical challenges of international knowledge transfer? To deal with this topic, I refer to two of the core questions in the current debate: “Should the validity of knowledge in religious education be considered general or universal, or should it be seen as particular and regionally bound?” And “What type of knowledge is transferred with what normative status?” (International Knowledge Transfer 2019, 93). Given the depth and complexity of these questions, it is obvious that the dimensions of “normativity” and “validity” should not be limited to a type of knowledge which only consists of certain “hardware” contents (like political frameworks, curricula, organisational structures, etc.). I would rather argue in the direction that these dimensions especially refer to a type of knowledge which has as its core the theoretical and epistemological understanding, so to speak, of the “software” of RE.

In other words, and to give the main thesis of the following article: In the current debate about didactics concerning the objectives and core contents of RE in Switzerland, increased efforts have to be made to overcome the hard polarisation between a purely “teaching about”, information-based form of RE on one hand and a denominational “teaching in”, instruction-based form of RE on the other hand. Therefore, the “didactics of the question” – due to its theological and epistemological meaning – allows to create a common didactical basis for non-denominational RE in contrast to such polarisations (Schlag and Suhner 2018). It is assumed that just such a didactical approach opens up possibilities for pupils and also for teachers to deal with truth claims of different religious perspectives and religions not only in an informative sense, but also to deal with them in a dialogical, hermeneutical and interreligiously open sense appropriate to the respective religion and at the same time in a personally relevant way. Because of

this, the dimensions of normativity and of validity come into play in a didactical, anthropological and theological sense. In this article the focus will lie on dealing with this normative horizon by asking how theologians in academia and in the practice of RE can deal not only with the epistemological question of *what to teach and learn*, but especially *how to teach and learn* in the context of non-denominational RE.

At the same time, it is argued for that such a didactical approach has the potential to create a content-related level of comparison in theoretical terms for the international and transnational academic debates on RE (Schweitzer and Schreiner 2019, 3). Because in the author's perception currently very similar fundamental discussions about the future of RE are taking place in many European countries. Thus, the following thematisation of this "didactics of the question" is to be understood as a specific epistemological and hermeneutical, theological and anthropological contribution to the international knowledge transfer and the question of "normativity" and "validity" of these contextual-based theoretical reflections within and about the Swiss context of RE.

2. Background information

To explain this in more detail, I will start with some background information which hopefully is not only informative but already allows for some first reflections on a comparative level: Firstly, it has to be mentioned that in Switzerland there is no common understanding or model of RE. On the contrary, the models of this school subject – as well as the models of teacher education – are highly pluralistic and appear in very different forms, although a strong tendency towards a model of non-denominational RE, named ERG ("Ethik – Religionen – Gemeinschaft"/"Ethics – Religions – Community") can be seen. If we look more closely into this plurality, one could well say that in a comparative sense ERG is an interesting microscopic facet which reveals a variation of the diversity of RE and its current developments and challenges on the European level.

Secondly, one of the core political arguments for establishing this non-denominational model over the last 20 years were the strong religion-related demographic changes within Switzerland since the 1960s, marked by a severe decline in church membership and a growing percentage of non-confessional inhabitants. In a wider sense, the Swiss religious situation can be perceived as a patchwork mixture of various institutionalised and individualised forms of religion and at the same time a declining public authority of the traditional churches – a situation which in turn is undoubtedly comparable with other European countries.

Thirdly, in terms of the cultural background and with regard to "religion" as a public issue, it also has to be emphasised that Switzerland traditionally shows a great caution in dealing with almost all forms of public ideological positioning

or certain truth claims. Not at least due to historical reasons of religious clashes since the time of the Reformation, which destabilised the nation, confessional beliefs tend to be regarded as expressive and aggressive forms with the potential to endanger internal and external neutrality and thus also threatening the political, social and cultural consensus. For this reason, the requirement of neutrality, even if not explicitly stated within the Swiss Federal Constitution, has been the decisive yardstick for the interpretation of religious law and continues to be so to this day. The second important constitutional principle is the strong federalism and thus an almost ontological subsidiarity as basic principle of the Swiss political system as well as its design- and decision-making logic.

Thus, RE in Switzerland – as academic discipline as well as school subject – has to be perceived as highly contextual in terms not only of its national, but also specifically of its regional and even local developments and educational frameworks which are often elaborated and implemented on the local school level (Schlag 2020b). Therefore, having the “contextual dimension” of the international knowledge transfer-debate in mind, there seem to be good reasons to merely rely upon, refer to and develop RE only in the Swiss context and its specific conditions – which would mean to more or less concentrate on internal issues that seem to have a priority status, like dealing with legal frameworks, developing curricula and teacher training as well as discussing concrete didactical and methodological issues.

On the other hand, RE in Switzerland is highly connected with global dynamics like questions of human rights issues (Suhner 2020), of religious freedom, global migration and most diverse truth claims. This is not only true due to its strong links to European history and current European political issues, like migration, racism and no less fundamentalist and growing antisemitic tendencies.

Therefore, in the perspective of international knowledge transfer, there are many good reasons for a broader and deeper theoretical academic reflection of RE beyond one’s own national or even regional contexts, but to understand RE in Switzerland as part of a broader picture – also with the potential to contribute to the debates about RE in other contexts. By focusing thematically on the issue of the “didactics of the question” it is argued for that this theoretical approach is relevant not only for the Swiss context but can also be inspiring on a broader European level in the perspective of a “worldview personhood formation” (Miedema 2018, 93). In the following, explanations are based on the thesis that despite all contextual peculiarities in the individual countries the challenge of a substantive didactical approach to religion-related questions may be less diverse than it appears at first glance.

3. Objectives

In order to set forth a clear religious-didactical approach for a “subject-related didactics ERG” the article refers specifically to the “theology of the question” (Theologie der Frage) of Hans-Dieter Bastian and presents a “didactics of the question”. Even though Bastian’s approach was developed more than 50 years ago, it can still be considered as fruitful. For already at that time Bastian assumed a situation in which the confessional certainties were considerably questioned and therefore the usual theological communication practices had to be fundamentally rethought. This theoretical – theological and anthropological – perspective therefore allows interpretations and at the same time theologically sensitive approaches to the specific challenges within non-denominational Religious Education (for more details cf. Suhner and Schlag 2018; for the didactical impacts Schlag and Suhner 2019; for the aims of ERG Bietenhard et al. 2015 and Schlag 2020a; for the historical developments Criblez 2020 and the current situation of RE in Switzerland Frank 2018; Schlag 2017; Jakobs 2016; Kunz et al. 2005).

This knowledge transfer, so to speak, across time and from the German context to the present Swiss situation shall provide a perspective on how different religious texts with their “truth claims” can become subjects of teaching in a theologically sensitive manner. It is argued that such “didactics of the question” is not concerned with abandoning the claim to truth of religious texts. To put it more concrete: This didactical perspective can be most helpful for dealing with the question of religious truth as well as with religious conflicts in a multireligious context. For the intended international knowledge transfer it might be inspiring to elaborate here, how especially the teaching of “holy scriptures” and processes of individual knowledge building processes can be combined within this Swiss model of RE and may also be fruitful for the wider European context.

4. Holy texts as a starting point for a “didactics of the question”

When non-denominational ERG in Switzerland refers to religious systems in order to bring public and private life contexts into dialogue with possible religious patterns of interpretation, teachers have to ask themselves which sources can, may and should be used to refer to religious systems. In this horizon, religious texts – especially literature that is considered within religious systems as “holy” – claim a specific kind of truth and dignity and such is also claimed by their representatives and believers. The Torah, the Bible, the Qur’an base their dignity on the fact that within them a specific relation between God and the human manifests itself, documented in the respective written document.

Such holy texts are entitled to the benefit of a decisive life-oriented norm-based function for the individual conduct of life and the larger societal context.

From here a clear educational challenge for RE arises: If religion is perceived in its norm-based function, then the reflection of such religious holy texts must be given adequate attention and space in the educational context. Nevertheless, and due to the principle of religious neutrality, RE in the Swiss context from a non-denominational perspective must maintain a specific awareness of the private sphere of the pupils and the teachers (Winzeler 2020). Thus, the specific pedagogical challenge of non-denominational RE from a hermeneutical, didactical and methodological point of view raises the question of how to provide and secure pupils' and teachers' freedom of religion while at the same time referring to religious texts and their truth claims.

Here comes a certain hermeneutic decision into play which can be expressed as the following: Religious texts – also holy scriptures – do not possess a clear "substance" that could be unquestionably conveyed. The meaning of these texts does not exist without their interpretation. Therefore, religious questions – specifically for monotheistic religions this includes the question of God – cannot be answered conclusively because holy scriptures can be traced back to different theological traditions, to lived religion and to different contexts. The incorporation of religious texts into public educational contexts thus presupposes a pluralistic reading of them. The integration of religious texts into teaching processes thus opens up discursive processes of the individuals' free interpretation. What can really be taught in Swiss RE in this respect is not – at least not primarily – the "substance of words" of religious texts, but rather the possibilities opened up by these texts for interpretation. In other words: Religious narratives, parables, metaphors or images become relevant only when personal, experience-oriented discussions about their possible truth claims be made possible.

5. Didactics of the question

Such "didactics of the question" can be based on the following premise as identified by the German educator Hans-Dieter Bastian: The human being as a human being is a question being (Bastian 1970, 9). As such, the human, in principle, lives in reference to a community (p. 13). Not only because questions hope for answers, but even more so because a "common question creates a common situation, and vice versa: a common situation is explained by common questions" (p. 22). Not the material questions, but "the question process" itself "connects all epochs with each other, and in such a way that it transforms every historical answer into a new historical question" (p. 56). Connected to this, the anthropological central concept of Bastian's theology is communication (based on questions) which is understood as a fundamental expression of life.

Misunderstandings, interruptions and disturbances in communication processes, on the other hand, lead to the loss of community feeling and contact.

Concerning the holiness of religious scriptures, a didactics of the question starts out as dealing with them as documents which have arisen from questions themselves – not in the sense of unambiguous collections of answers, but as promised movements of longing and searching (Oz and Oz-Salzberger 2012).

What is theologically and pedagogically interesting is that parts of these traditional experiences themselves now represent questions – even explicit ones. To stick to the example of Christian Scripture: With “What is Truth?” (John 18,38) can be asked about memory or interreligious dialogue; with “Where are you?” (Genesis 3,9) questions of identity or human dignity, theological anthropology, feelings of powerlessness, etc. can be asked; questions such as “What should I do for you?” (Mark 10,51) or “Why are you crying?” (John 20,15) are able to promote an eye for ethics, grace, mercy; that famous question: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27,46) opens the view for theodicy, also for hope or spirit, etc.; the questions: “Who is to blame for this man being blind? Did he blame himself or his parents?” (John 9,2) or “Where were you when I created the world?” (Job 38,4) put the themes of guilt and responsibility, of creation or reconciliation into perspective; the question “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10,29) meets beyond a single specific religion a basic social and political question, etc.

These holy books, scriptures and dialogues can therefore be presented and discussed in RE as experienced answers or subjectively experienced certainties of people and groups of people with very diverse experiences. Such a view can be concretely underpinned biblically-theologically: In a differentiated way Bastian traces for instance “Israel’s question culture” and refers to how in the course of time “the why question in mourning and grief is transformed into a negative request” – until finally the question itself almost comes to silence, which, according to Bastian, has led to a clearly perceptible “loss in God’s relationship” (Bastian 1970, 269).

Another biblical-theological tradition can be traced in the view of praying: “Praying means asking questions!” (p.270). On the basis of the Job narrative, Bastian sketches the question as a “form of life expected of man from God [...]”. If God would answer Job, he would stand on the theological level of discussion of Job’s friends. His answer would then be “solution, not redemption”. (p.274) But this would then not lead to a life-relevant perspective.

From such an hermeneutic approach, holy scriptures can become an important source for teaching processes. They become relevant when pupils and teachers exchange ideas on the crucial question, to what extent these written testimonies are in themselves documents of individual and communal experiences and processes of searching for answers to crucial existential questions.

6. The context of the question

From here, any didactical recording of religious texts is only appropriate and hermeneutically meaningful if and when one "places oneself in the context of the questions raised by the socio-cultural environment" (Bastian 1970, 100). Bastian refers in this respect to the situational context, the place in life ("Sitz im Leben") as a specific *question context*: "There is always a very specific question behind a historical problem [...] Whoever does not know this one question [...] necessarily conceals the problem. He unhistorically deduces from his own response system another one which he equates with his own. This act of unification [...] is a hermeneutic crime of high rank" (p. 100). The fact that Bastian in this context uses the terms "Gleichschaltung" (forcing people to comply with the political system), that of "crime", "propaganda" or "ideology", all of which refer to the political terminology of the Nazi era, makes it clear how essential the individual freedom of questioning and finding answers is to him for a human being's very existence. In this respect, his approach – it has to be remembered that the end of the Second World War was just over 20 years before his publication – is also based on the deep democratic conviction of what RE has to achieve contrary to all political and religious indoctrination intentions.

In his differentiated analysis of the question, Bastian turns against a closed, fake, non-dialogical question: against a question whose place in life is not the present one. By the way, with regard to the church he states: "Since the Protestant Church has timelessly committed itself to the catechisms of the Reformation, it renounces the possibility to educate for a certain social space and is content with the empty abstraction of correct theology. For, of course, the questions and answers of the catechisms are not static and timeless, but bound to a place of thought that is didactically relevant and sociologically researchable." (p. 92) It can be assumed that Bastian here also has the highly problematic role of a large part of the Protestant Church during the Third Reich in his mind, which legitimised the existing political order with the supposedly unequivocal reference to the divine order of creation, or rather did not contradict this order precisely out of a certain "theological" interest (which was probably primarily an ecclesiastical interest) and certainly did not resist it.

In short, didactics of the question is concerned with the reflected renunciation of the claim to a clear answer (p. 305). In this respect such religious texts permit and even demand both theological and cultural hermeneutical, aesthetic and further patterns of interpretation – and thus consequently make possible a personal, experience-oriented discussion on the side of the pupils and within the classroom. Bastian consistently thinks of the arrangement of any educational process as a communicative act: If the reality of life is questionable per se, this must be reflected in the reality of education.

Such an educational approach can make plausible how different religious texts with their “truth claims” can become subjects of teaching in a theologically sensitive way. Such didactics of the question enables one to deal with the truth claims and therefore with the normative claims of religious texts in a dialogical way. And even more, by taking questions seriously as part of religious communication, such an approach contributes to make religion plausible – by not judging critical viewpoints, existential doubts or non-religious self-positioning negatively, but rather giving space for reflecting on their possible meaning. Such didactics of the question promotes and encourages open communication between different attempts at answering religious questions as not only cultural-historical knowledge, but also as, precisely, religious and existential questions. The goal of a “didactics of the question” is therefore never a normative endpoint.

To bring a current voice into the conversation here: In the horizon of Hartmut Rosa’s resonance pedagogy (Rosa and Endres 2016), which currently finds a lively pedagogical reception, a didactics of the question can be emphasised again specifically. Rosa understands religion “as the idea, made perceptible in rites and practices, in songs and narratives, partly also in buildings and works of art, that this something is an answer, an accommodating – and an understanding. God is then basically the idea of an *answering* world.” (Rosa 2016, 435, italics added)

From here a pedagogical and theological point becomes clear: A didactics of the question, as we emphasise it, does not *only* start from holy scriptures as question documents. Neither *does* it start from questions asked by learners or *only* by teachers. It starts essentially from the questions behind the three elements that shape every educational process: educational contents, teachers, and learners – and from the fact that *answers* can be given *through the interaction of these three movements of questioning*. Always in and from the moment, constitutively situational, and individual.

The following applies to religious texts: They are made to speak, the reader can change them by asking questions about them against the background of his or her own life. Reinhold Boschki refers in precisely this context to the approaches of child and youth theology: “all these are also basic concerns [...] of child and youth theology. The latter wants exactly that: to make the voice of the young people sound and vibrate and thereby to attribute to them [the young people, in addition to the dignity of the religious texts, T. S.] a theological dignity.” (Boschki 2018, 47)

Referring to Rosa, another aspect needs to be emphasised with the didactics of the question: The *movement of the question* – behind the religious text; the reader; the teacher – in short: the contextual reference in its “asking for questions”-way is one thing. The *openness of response* – in Christian terminology: the eschatological openness – is the other. With regard to the person of Jesus, Bastian aptly states: “Who Jesus really is must not be answered one-sidedly from the historical tradition, but must be expected anew with the question.” (Bastian

1970, 54) The renunciation of postulating truth is not an easy demand. Religious certainty, however, is not obedience but hope.

Methodically, this leads to a plea for a context-sensitive interpretive question on the one hand and for narratives, symbolic didactics, constructivist approaches – as an open form of answers or open space for answers – on the other. This is essential because the majority of topics in religious texts, such as creation, the covenant or resurrection are not abstract concepts, but metaphors, symbols, etc., “which want to have their say in detailed narratives” (p. 215).

From these characterisations of religious tradition and the hermeneutical basic considerations the question arises all the more urgently how a non-denominational school subject that is decidedly conceived from the perspective of religious neutrality and its pedagogical self-understanding can be more closely determined.

7. Holy scriptures as the subject of education

Does the thematisation of religious texts in the context of the subject ERG automatically lead to an inopportune religious imprinting of the pupils, inappropriate for a non-denominational school subject? Or are there real and appropriate chances of discussing religious texts as personal and life-relevant resources?

Starting from the theological-hermeneutic and didactical characterisation of holy scriptures as written documents of question, I argue for a didactical access to holy scriptures in a didactical movement of questioning: Neither theologically nor pedagogically justifiable is any access that “hastily reaches for the dogmatic preserves of answers [...]. Because millions of people have suffered worse than Job in this century and continue to suffer, the Christian has no choice: either they believe like Job, accusing God and questioning him, or they enter into the chatter of the many who do not speak right because they answer like Job’s friends.” (Bastian 1970, 346)

As for ERG: A didactics of the question gains relevance in view of the current debates about religious literacy in its broader sense of integrating the three-fold ERG-perspective of “Ethics, Religions and Community” in a specific way: The didactics of the question aims at a discursive teaching which takes the questions of the pupils (and teachers themselves!) seriously. Understanding religions in the sense of “theologising” does not mean to provide clear answers, but first of all to provide open space (Schlag et al. 2018): for the perception, searching, understanding of the transcendent or for the “arrival of God in a space which we can keep open only with the question as *aporia*” (Bastian 1970, 336). The recording of religious texts – documents as written documents of “experienced religion” – can also reverse the tendency of making them easily accessible.

By taking questions seriously as part of religious communication, the subject can contribute to the plausibilisation of religion – not judging critical points of view, intellectual questions, existential doubts and non-religious self-positioning negatively, but rather giving them meaning (Schlag 2007). The subject has to make the pupils aware of the fact that religious questions – that is specifically for monotheistic religions the question of God – cannot be answered conclusively. Such a didactical approach sensitises pupils to the awareness of moments of self-efficacy and unavailability (Rosa 2018, 40).

The theology of the question promotes and encourages open communication between different attempts at answering religious questions – not primarily as a kind of cultural-historical knowledge, but precisely as religious and personally relevant questions. In this sense, the harmonised curriculum for Swiss schools named “Lehrplan 21” and the integrated ERG formulates the possibility of retelling religious stories in a meaningful way – and the sensitisation of the pupils to the various literary forms and religious ideas of religious texts. This is by far more than just a knowledge-based “teaching about” approach.

Let me briefly mention the consequences of such an approach for RE teachers in the Swiss context: Because the aim of the didactics of the question require skills of perception, translation and communication, it is necessary that RE teachers have a high pedagogical competence and awareness of the pitfalls of normative absolutes. He or she has to implement a comprehensive culture of questions, not to convey “eternal answers to current questions”, but to let “question collide with question” (Bastian 1970, 312). This approach aims at involving all “participants” in the educational process: the questioning reader, the questioning text, the questioning teacher. The prerequisite for enabling such a culture of questioning is, on the part of the teacher, deep knowledge of various religions and theologies, of the respective textual origins and their social, political and societal contexts. Equally necessary is a fundamental ability to reflect on one’s own religious and theological questions (Englert 2020) and a corresponding pedagogical sensitivity for those of the pupils.

8. Concluding remarks

To the extent that ERG teaching is also about promoting (inter-)religious language and communication skills, such didactics of the question can prove to be sharpening and inspiring for the current ERG didactical discussion in Switzerland. But such an approach of a “didactics of the question” might also be inspiring on the level of academic research concerning international knowledge transfer and also for the broader European debate on the future of RE.

This openness for different perspectives of and on truth holds true not only in the sense of possible comparisons of different hermeneutical and didactical

approaches but also the role of theology as a science of reference for teaching and learning in RE.

But such openness is also crucial for academic work itself. In other words: Any academic exchange should start with questions such as: How far should the intended exchange actually go? What is really up for discussion? What is at stake in such cross-border discourses?

Such questions are by no means purely artificial, nor are they simply l’art pour l’art. Rather, fundamental debates often break out precisely with the question of the future organisation of RE in schools. These are obviously particularly intense where they are connected both with the intention of exclusive interpretation and concretely with the implementation of a certain education policy. In this respect, too, the example of Switzerland provides a microscopic illustration, so to speak, of the current clashes between, for example, approaches derived from a religious studies perspective or a theological perspective.

Thus, it would be quite helpful to self-critically ask oneself: Is the national and international exchange on different models of RE primarily a question of plausibilising and legitimising one’s own regional practice and position in the end – in the sense of only telling one’s own truth and sticking to own’s own normativity? Do we really want to learn from other contexts, and if not, why not?

If such questions about the self-understanding of the researchers and their specific objectives, motivations and attitudes naturally arise and are allowed, then this is probably not the worst starting point for international exchange. Therefore, the Swiss model of non-denominational education can gain hermeneutical validity beyond its local, regional and national borders (cf. Schweitzer and Schreiner 2019), not only as an interesting example of a specific model in the European context, but also as an inspirational source for mindful international knowledge transfer on the future of RE.

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