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Thomas Schlag

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Confessional and Interreligious Perspectives

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The Public Church and Public Religious Education as forms of ‘Protestant Presence’ – Confessional and Interreligious Perspectives

Thomas Schlag

Abstract

Due to the tendency of declining church membership and growing religious plurality, the transformation of confessional Religious Education as a school subject into something like a pure “teaching about”-model seems to be the most promising future scenario. But there are good reasons for developing a Religious Education model with a certain confessional perspective, providing and combining didactical forms of “teaching about” and “learning from”. Such a complementary pedagogical and theological approach is not only very plausible and promising but also a sustainable model for a Protestant public presence in the broader field of public education. The prerequisite for this is a new self-understanding and clear conceptual form of the Public Church (in the broader sense of Protestant public presence) and a positive attitude towards the theological interpretation of freedom, responsibility and hope, manifested by its representatives in the different educational fields of church and school.

1. Introduction – An indication of the current situation of the Protestant churches and confessional Religious Education in Switzerland

When observing the current ‘reform rhetoric’ in the Swiss and German Protestant churches, one gets the impression that time is almost running out. The future of the church – at least in its traditional form – seems to be in doubt and at risk. There are predictions that the *Volkskirche* (the people’s church) will soon be ‘without people’: A severe loss of members within the German-speaking churches has indeed been observed, the decline in church attendance on regular Sunday services is obvious, the reputation of its representatives in the broader public perception is weakening. The number of members is decreasing yearly by about 1%. In Zurich, only about 25% of all inhabitants still belong to Zwingli’s “Reformed Church”. Over the last two decades in Switzerland, the number of non-confessionals has risen from 1% to about 20% – and is still increasing, especially in urban contexts. The overall situation in Germany is not very different.

This somehow dramatic shift can also be described in a more content-related sense: The knowledge about Christian traditions, rituals and biblical narratives seems to be fading – amongst almost all generations and almost independently of their social or educational background. The common ground of the secular pluralistic society obviously no longer requires a confessional-cultural base.

Similar negative perceptions and pessimistic expectations seem to hold true for the public opinion on Religious Education (RE) at schools: Examining these developments and attitudes, in particular, the form of a ‘monopolist’ confessional RE has come under severe pressure. Of course, religion is still – and recently increasingly – considered by the broader public as an important element, especially due to the current global religious conflicts and clashes. But whether any confessional form of RE could and should really contribute to dealing productively with these conflicts is intensely questioned. Especially because of the religious and cultural plurality, it is doubted whether confessional education could at all address this plurality in the classroom in a just and equal manner.

Due to these developments, RE in Switzerland – at least in the majority of cantons – has already been substituted by a non-confessional form of “teaching about religion” (*Religionskunde*) some years ago. In Germany, results of a recent survey – even if it presents a broad lack of empirical plausibility (rpi-virtuell, 2016) – indicate that 70% of the German population favours the replacement of classical confessional RE at schools with a form of general value education (YouGov, 2016). When parents are questioned about what they expect from RE for their children, many of them wish the subject to foster a kind of general knowledge about religion, as well as about the aspects, traditions, rituals and beliefs of different religions, instead of primarily a certain confessional approach (Voirol-Sturzenegger, 2014, pp. 185ff.) – whereas any confessional monopoly in the field of RE is considered to be somehow anachronistic (this is critically reflected by Vai, 2016).

However, the question arises: Is such a transformation of public confessional RE really the only future possible scenario? Or are there still good reasons for this specific pedagogical, theological and didactical design of RE in its ‘confessional version’? Can confessional RE, or: better: RE *with* a certain confessional perspective – contribute to and address religious plurality and secular tendencies, and if so, in which sense?

1.1 What is meant by the “confessional” perspective?

I will raise the argument, that RE with a confessional perspective (for Germany according to its constitution, Art. 7, 3 “in accordance with the tenets of the religious communities”, and for Switzerland with its different cantonal representations) is still very plausible and promising and also a sustainable model for a Protestant public presence – but only if one condition can be fulfilled: A new self-understanding is required, as well as a clear conceptual form of the *Public Church* (herein expressed in a broader sense of *Protestant public presence*) implemented by its representatives in the different fields of work, whether in the church itself or, in particular, in the public school sector: I consider this the idea of a *Public Church as an intermediate institution, founded on a substantial base of specific biblical and theological traditions and forms of theological communication.*

A differentiation between *confessional RE*, RE *in* a confessional perspective, and RE *with* a confessional perspective, might be helpful in this context. I defend the “with”-model in the sense of integrating biblical, confessional and theological aspects, understanding RE not as an exclusively church-related school subject, but as a serious pedagogical method of *teaching about* and *learning from* a certain religion, as well as from different religions and their traditions, including the perspective on one’s own personal questions and orientations related to the religious dimension.

1.2 The public role and importance of Protestantism

Church as an intermediate institution means: not only plausible forms of a public presence of Protestantism are required within society, but also a deep reflection about the very concept of such *presence*. Such new self-consciousness requires a *public theology* based on the central ideas of the reinvention of the Protestant reformation movement: freedom, responsibility and hope. Such hope in the public role and importance of Protestantism has important consequences for the central features of individual Christian practice and church characteristics, namely *martyria*, *diakonia*, *leiturgia* and *koinonia*. I will elaborate on this line of thought by focusing on the issue of *public RE* as a specific form of introducing *martyria* – in the primary sense of a certain theological and personal attitude of *witnessing* – into the field of public education and establishing its presence within contemporary society.

Thus, the question of such presence is highly dependent on the fact whether its representatives – especially ministers, teachers and catechists – can *communicate and provide helpful guidance on the controversial issues of current religious, interreligious and political life*. This *public Protestant responsibility* shall consolidate its meaningful presence within the context of RE by professional and personal faithful means of *theological communication and interpretation*, within and for society (see, in this sense, also Fechtner, 2010).

2. Protestant traditions of public reflection and proclamation

My initial question is: Is it at all justified to speak of a *Public Church, Protestant presence and public theology as a new concept*? At first sight, this is unnecessary, as church practice and theology have always claimed to influence public issues and questions. The free and courageous preaching of the gospel in public and to the public (see Mt 28) is essential for the Judeo-Christian religion straight from its roots, as well as its institutional structure throughout the ages.

Such public, highly-courageous presence and attitude is particularly evident in the age of reformation: before all eyes and ears of the public, the reformers Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox and others formulated their theological critique towards the existing public powers of church and state. By doing so, they created and established a kind of powerful Protestant *counter-public* – with enormous, as well as institutional – consequences, also for the concept of theological communication and therefore the field of Religious Education (see Schweitzer, 2016). For this reason, right from the beginning, their ideas about religious education were never restricted to church life in a narrow sense. But they were to contribute to the common good in a much broader sense: From its beginning in the 16th century, the protagonists of the new faith construed and proclaimed – based on the concept of divine justice – the idea of a *common public realm* and thus of a *close cooperation of state, church and society*. According to Protestant theological self-understanding, faith and church should amply contribute to society, the common welfare and the idea of the dignity of the individual believer.

To recall Zwingli's line of argument at this point: "Relying on the grace of God alone, and maintained by it, we ought to recognise that God's Word is the sole source of good. We should bear in mind that God's commandments, although we cannot live by them,

are fulfilled for us in Christ, and that therefore God considers us righteous. This, indeed, is what sustains the world. God's commandments are therefore bearers of both individual and social salvation for the believer." (Courvoisier, 1962, p. 80– 81). This means that divine and humane justice both "depend on Christ, through whose power the world persists and history continues to unfold." (Courvoisier, 1962, p. 81). Or in other words: "Human justice is a makeshift, but it is makeshift by the will of God, for it is necessary in human affairs. [...] In this context, governors and judges are rightly called God's servants or ministers." (Courvoisier, 1962, p. 83). This means that the believing Christian shall obey the laws for his conscience's sake and not for fear of punishment. His submission is indeed out of obedience to God. To love one's neighbour is therefore not a question of adjusting to worldly regularities, but is set in the realm of the individual conscience and personal faith.

An important consequence of this Protestant perspective was the idea of the *Prophetic Office as Guardian* ("Prophetisches Wächteramt"), by which the church and every individual believer should be motivated to withstand unjust and inhuman political activities – and to conscientiously raise one's own voice in the name of God's will. So, if the authorities themselves are bad, "if they attack God's word or order preachers to distort the Word for their benefit, then it is necessary to resist them, and if necessary, to depose them, for 'we must obey God above men' (Acts 5:29)." (Courvoisier, 1962, p. 84.). Thus, prophetic action could be required in such events. But to learn what the situation was like, education, in concrete: public education, in concrete: the ongoing study of the Scripture was the undoubted prerequisite. Thus it was a consequential fact that the Zurich reform established itself initially by implementing the so-called "Prophezei" in the Zurich Grossmünster, a public daily congregational practice of reading and hearing the Word, translating and interpreting the Scripture, debating its deeper meaning for individual guidance in life as well as for society, and celebrating it in the sense of a prophecy-service. Consequently, "Zwingli's concept of the prophet as overseer or watchman over the entirety of the Christian commonwealth was charged with socio-political potential." (Timmermann, 2015, p. 125).

Of course, this theological argumentation derived from a certain understanding on behalf of the public, as God's own realm. 500 years later, one should not even dare to re-establish this idea of such a harmonistic and homogeneous, in some regions of the reform even theocratic understanding of society. Nevertheless, the fundamental idea of a strong connection between *individual conscience* and *public responsibility*, or

better, of *educational responsibility* in the public and for the public, can still be a strong guidance.

500 years after this Protestant starting point and amidst severe societal challenges, it is questioned whether the theological concept of such a *conscience-driven public articulation* can still be a relevant proposition for the church's and Protestant self-understanding, within secularity and for secular society. I argue that these figures of thought are not anachronistic – although the postmodern world is characterized by secular principles, they can be of guidance for the individual and communal conduct in life and can therefore be understood as complementary forces for dealing with the world's complexities and dilemmas.

3. Educational reflections in the perspective of a public theology and a Public Church

What do I mean by speaking of '*public*' and *public 'presence'*? Public is, of course, the opposite of '*private*'; moreover, it denotes a certain ideal description of society as a *transparent* and *open discursive society*. In this context, I have in mind not only certain political figures or parties, but the concept of politics as an *issue of civil society and life itself*. '*Public*' is hereby understood as a truly democratic and participatory concept of transparency and engagement, within which all decisions and hierarchies can only be justified if the persons and institutions in charge consider themselves as being responsible for their public duty (Schlag, 2012). And in a theological sense, I would like to add: '*Public*' is not only a concept which is significant for political, but also for ecclesiological and educational reflection and work – which will be explicated in the next section.

3.1 The public dimension of public theology

Transparent forms of public communication require 'institutional interfaces' between the different groups and actors. This is where the church comes into play: The church can be considered an *intermediary institution* within these communicative and interactive processes.

At the same time, this role as an intermediate institution is itself deeply connected with the *interpretation of the gospel* itself. The theoretical basis for such a concept can be found in three principles of the Christian faith: *freedom* (see e.g. 2 Cor. 3,7),

responsibility (see e.g. Lk 10,25-37) and *hope* (see e.g. 1 Pet. 3,15). All these aspects characterize the church's role as an intermediary institution – whether in congregational practice, or in RE in the school context. The precise justification for naming these three *guiding perspectives* is that these are *central theological concepts*, on which the plurality of Protestant practice can be structured. Thus, freedom, responsibility and hope are key terms, as, due to their *use in everyday language*, they can act as communicative interfaces between secular and confessional activities.

There is a strong assumption and conviction within the concept of *public theology* that democracy has to rely on strong ties of solidarity and communal life. In other words: Public theology shares the deep democratic conviction of the importance of just communities and civic education. Considering this – and bearing in mind the social challenges and the current global dynamics of civil society – it is obvious that this concept of public theology – is highly inspiring for the church's practice. This takes us to the next section.

3.2 The ecclesiological implications

Against the background of the current situation, public theology provides a new chance to better *connect* individuals and their needs and potentials, the church and its traditions, as well as society and its challenges: Public theology highlights the importance of small communities. Church work can and should be understood as community work in this context. Congregational work should aim at contributing to and creating new social space. The local congregation considers itself part of the neighbourhood and as a *contributor to grassroots politics* (see Schlag & Aus der Au, 2017). This also has strong implications for RE in the context of public schools. However, a certain problem arises when the terms 'freedom', 'responsibility' and 'hope' are mentioned: As long as they occur and are used as *nouns*, they remain more or less abstract. They are, of course, used in official declarations of Protestant bishops or church councils. But in such cases, they merely remain abstract. Thus, if they are to become relevant to public debate and truly to be inherited, these principles need to be brought *down to earth*, they must be envisaged from the actor's 'bottom-up'-perspective. Therefore, it seems more appropriate not to speak of public Protestant presence as the presence of bishops and not of the church as an 'institution of freedom'. It seems more adequate to speak in a theological sense of the *presence of*

liberated, responsible and hopeful individuals. In other words: The concept of a *Public Church* is not so much about finding the right terms of dogmatic definition, but about taking into strong consideration the individuals and their individual potentials of public practice.

Thus, the concept of a *Public Intermediate Church – and therefore its religious educational practice (!)* – is not just an additional feature of self-understanding, but a central perspective for all Protestant responsibility, whether within the church practice or within the broader public realm. Such a public self-understanding can be acknowledged as a clear statement for the willingness of its *basic representatives* to serve all people within society and can therefore be estimated as a true *martyria*-attitude of Protestant faith.

This understanding of public theology and public Protestant faith leads to two general challenges for RE with a confessional perspective in public schools: 1) the preparedness to understand RE itself as an institutional form of intermediary education between the individuals and the society, and 2) the willingness towards a clear option for integration and inclusion, with a general empathic attitude towards the poor, the unjustly-treated and weak in society.

In this next section, I will ask in more detail how RE in schools, in the context of this theological perspective, can contribute to the common good in the context of religious plurality and the heterogeneous secular society.

3.3 The educational dimension of public theology and public Protestant presence

Just as a reminder: Confessional RE in Germany is an intermediary form, guaranteed by the German constitution (“Basic Law”), referring to the cooperation of church and state, with the aim to contribute to comprehensive education and providing to society what society cannot generate itself (see Böckenförde, 1976, p. 60). What does this mean in the larger context of a confessional RE? To address this question, some explanations must be made beforehand about the theological sense of understanding *church as community*. In doing so, I am not suggesting that RE at school shall aim at a ‘church form’ – so it is not about bringing the church back into school! But what I want to present is quasi the theological DNA, which teachers of RE should have in mind when they assume educational and professional responsibility in a communicative and participatory manner.

Protestant faith is based on its believers' confidence that God has spoken and will speak his decisive and blessing word (in particular, refer to the beatitudes Mt 5,3-12; Lk 6,20-26), most helpful for individual life guidance. In this respect, the apostle Paul's teaching about the charismata (see 1 Cor. 12) can act as guiding line and serve for the ideal of a participatory Protestant presence. Additionally, the ecclesiological version of the church as *corpus permixtum* avoids all problematic strategies of separating true from false membership. In ethical terms, all narrow moralistic attitudes are highly problematic. Also, the assumption that there could be clear ethical judgments and actions according to the Christian spirit, undermines the complexity of ethical issues. In other words: The theological idea of human variation itself allows to address plurality and complexity in the most merciful and acknowledging sense.

Thus, Protestant intermediary action avoids all aspirations of finding an absolute truth within the public discourse, fixed for now and all times. In this respect, any attempt to create something above individual actors and members is theologically highly problematic, because it neglects the pluralism of the body and parts-metaphor (1 Cor 12) and the image of the Christian community as spiritual community of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2,5). For the individual ethical practice, this means nothing more nor less than to contribute to this community by listening and interpreting the gospel with a *free, responsible and hopeful attitude*.

Such Christian attitude shapes the specific character of the educational principles within the Protestant church as a community of free, responsible and hopeful intermediary discourse. Such a communication can be understood as a form of *hermeneutical and theological communication* and therefore must be shaped as *performative communication*. To consider it from the perspective of the recipients in the classroom: The starting point for successful theological communication must be shaped by the *needs and potentials* of the pupils themselves. They must never be considered mere objects of instruction but real contributors and co-operators within the educational context. They provide most relevant contents for the educational approach in the sense of *teaching about* religions and *learning personally from* them and their faithful followers. Thus, public communication within RE must respectfully consider the plurality of the communication partners. In this sense, it can be a role model for democratic communication within civil society itself.

4. Challenges to Protestant RE in the school context – Core characteristics of a just, conscience-driven interreligious education and ‘discursive prophecy’

As I have just stated: The guiding Protestant principles of freedom, responsibility and hope must be put into concrete participatory action to form a community of solidarity. What does this mean for the challenges of a public RE from a confessional perspective – especially in an interreligious dimension? To explain it in more basic terms:

In that sense, the “inter” primarily means to motivate hermeneutical processes of exchange regarding *possible* theological meanings of certain traditions – without excluding any of the pupil’s voices, whether Christian, from other religions, agnostic, atheistic or just non-confessional. Due to demographic developments, the composition of pupils will become more and more plural and heterogeneous. Interreligious education in that sense, is of course about acquiring knowledge about different traditions; furthermore, it is also a didactical approach to motivate the pupils to *learn from* each other. As I have previously mentioned: The confessional perspective is not exclusive, but it can provide opportunities and pedagogical forms of *teaching about* and *learning from* a certain religion, as well as from different religions and their traditions.

But how does the real situation in confessional RE appear in an empirical sense?

A rather disappointing aspect must be mentioned at this point: Initial scientific studies on how to measure efforts and possible effects of an interreligious RE have been conducted, but so far it is not clear, what exactly is happening in the classroom (see Benner, Schieder, Schluß & Willems, 2011). Even worse, so far, no adequate instruments of measuring interreligious competence in educational processes have even been implemented.

Although extensive teaching materials for the classrooms and teacher training have been developed in recent years, the real outcome has not been put to the test. So far, we can only question which forms of theological communication could contribute to a better knowledge and understanding in the classroom. The current didactical debate about children theology and youth theology opens up to the challenge of classroom processes which actually consider the participants’ views and attitudes as well as their critical viewpoints and even their resistance towards certain theological contents and interpretations (see Schlag & Schweitzer, 2011; Schlag & Schweitzer, 2012).

Even though we are not empirically well enough informed about the ideal way of 'conducting' interreligious dialogue in the classroom within RE *with* a confessional perspective, not to mention measuring possible effects and outcomes, I conclude with a somehow teacher-orientated conclusion in five short points:

First – *in a pedagogical perspective* – as a teacher of RE (in the broader sense), it means to be fully aware of and reflect on one's own thoughts, beliefs and actions. This means: one of the worst experiences is when teachers are unaware of their appearance, whether due to their language, their attitudes, their ignorance or their arrogance. People do not expect teachers to be better persons. They are quite realistic. But they do not accept if we act worse than a "normal" person would do. In other words: Theological communication is in many cases primarily a question of pedagogical professionalism, the ability of self-perception and self-reflection and therefore a challenge of *authentic appearance* (Burrichter et al., 2012). Therefore, they must be encouraged to be *self-aware and self-critical*.

Second – *in a political perspective*: It was Zwingli who speaks of justice as the most important perspective of God for the world and for our activities (see Zwingli, 1523/1995, pp. 155–213). God's justice and human justice are two sides of the same coin. RE teachers must indicate where injustice occurs in the world, where forms and strategies of exclusion are taking place and people are being prejudiced and discriminated in their daily life. As a very privileged group within society, teachers have the responsibility to apply their privileges to the benefit of the excluded and those ignored. Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to be courageous, self-conscious and to exhibit their 'free spirit'.

Third – *in a personal perspective*: RE teachers certainly and very often find themselves in the middle of very complex and dilemmatic situations, maybe even in very intense conflicts regarding what is claimed as the one and only (religious) truth. Thus, they should not ignore the complexity of such conflicts and not underestimate their own relevant contribution. Such claims to the truth probably present the biggest challenge to religious and interreligious RE. Thus, teachers should be encouraged to be truthful and to address the plurality of voices with a tolerant and open-minded attitude.

Fourth – *in a theological perspective*: RE teachers, from the first day at school, find themselves in an exposed public position. On arrival at a new school, they have not achieved anything, have not gained anything and have not contributed to anything

within that school environment. Nonetheless, pupils and colleagues will start trusting them and treating them – hopefully – in a respectful way. Thus, the worst possible attitude would be to be ignorant, boring and tepid. Therefore, in the sense of *martyria* teachers of RE should be encouraged to “be the salt and light for the world” (Mt 5,13–16) and to manifest their hope.

Fifth – *in an interreligious and inter-theological perspective*: in the present and the future, confessional RE can only be legitimized, if it provides perspectives for the debate of religious questions far beyond the – so to say – own home ground. It is indeed what Karl Ernst Nipkow called the “strong pluralism”, one that does not downplay differences (see Nipkow, 1998, p. 304–305), which is required to initiate a dialogue with the other. As a RE teacher, one must conscientiously demonstrate what it means to be borne by God’s freedom, to show the responsibility that Christ has exemplified and to manifest the hope of the Holy Spirit. In the German language, I must admit, this sounds stranger than in English, and maybe even a bit over-enthusiastic. This must not be misunderstood in the sense that I advocate for RE teachers once again to become strong representatives of the church within the school context. Neither do I argue for RE teachers to act as witnesses in a missionary style, e.g. explicitly considering themselves “salesmen” of an exclusive Christian faith. All this would not fulfil the RE requirements and would clash with the educational responsibilities within the public-school system.

An RE teacher must very clearly demonstrate his or her specific passion for the Word and for the task. This is – in a broad sense of (implicit) *martyria* – primarily not a matter of words and certain codes, but of *witnessing authentic attitude and action*. Thus, they should be reminded and encouraged to be passionate and to show their faith – not against or in opposition to other religions, but in being in line with their Protestant convictions, in searching *common religious and theological perspectives* – and disclosing the beauty and wisdom of any religion.

To conclude, from a Protestant perspective, the church refers to the important differentiation between *the visible and invisible church*. The church as the community of the liberated, responsible and hopeful needs to find its own way between worldly activities and the hope of overcoming all these secular conditions within the perspective of present eschatological hope (Lk 11,20), without excluding itself from the world as a community of saints. Theological communication and action in the

classroom is not decisive for the salvation of the world and it will also not be able to solve the current crisis of the *Volkskirche* (the people's church), which I mentioned above. But, in this sense, RE can hopefully implement something which I describe as *discursive prophecy* or *prophetic literacy*. In this event, Religious Education, within such a Protestant context, might not only help to better address the current worldly situation and its interreligious challenges, but also to legitimize RE *with* a confessional perspective in public schools in the future.

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