Thomas Schlag

Human rights education in religious education – a theological perspective

Abstract

In this article, it is argued that a specific scientific approach to the contemporary human rights issue from a theological perspective contributes substantially and significantly to the general pedagogical goal of dealing with human rights in religious education (RE) in the German and Swiss school context. The central idea of human dignity and the importance of acknowledging and protecting every human being – as core values of a human living together – opens up different and multifaceted perspectives of dealing theoretically and practically with this issue from a theological perspective. Due to the challenges presented by the plural society, such an approach includes theologies from different religious traditions and does at the very least not exclude secular world-view perspectives. In that sense, RE with its general framework of specific theological and anthropological determinations and distinctions can form an important basis for broaching the human rights issue in the classroom and for inspiring individual as well as group learning processes within the context of public education.

1. Recent developments and debates about RE in Germany and Switzerland

Within the education system in the Federal Republic of Germany, RE continues to be well established as a denominational subject as guaranteed by the constitution and it is ratified in the school laws of most federal states. However, in the current context of religious plurality, this model is facing considerable challenges to its legitimacy and plausibility, not only because of alternative models throughout Europe, but also due to secularisation, declining church membership and a growing number of non-confessional students. Recent empirical results indicate that even amongst teachers of RE the denominational basis is questioned (Pohl-Patalong et al., 2016; Gennerich & Mokrosch; Rothgangel et al. 2017) and not to mention the doubts amongst a significant number of parents who it appears would rather that their children acquire more of a general understanding of religion and religions.

Furthermore, in a number of critical comments made by key players in education policy, the question of the *importance and appropriateness of a denominational focus* is raised and, in criticism of denominational segregation of school classes, the case is made for a principally ecumenical co-operation at the very least. The model of confessional-cooperative RE has indeed been established in some federal states in recent years and has already become a subject of preliminary evaluations which focus on the suitability of this model (Pemsel-Maier et al., 2011). Nevertheless, from an even stronger, somewhat secularist, if not laicistic position, a

‘non-confessional’, ‘neutral’ form of RE is perceived as the consequent alternative to any denominational or ecumenical RE (Kenngott et al., 2015). This ‘neutral’ model, which is based on the state and school authorities having a clear monopolist responsibility for RE, has developed in recent years and was implemented in a large number of Swiss cantons, clearly referring to the English and Scandinavian multi-faith approach models of RE (for an overview Schlag, 2016). Due to the extensive harmonisation measures implemented in the Swiss school curriculum, it can be expected that despite cantonal differences, this ‘neutral’ idea of RE shall be established as the core pedagogical paradigm for RE in the whole of Switzerland (Bietenhard et al., 2015), again closely supported by a secularist, if not a laicist, understanding of the distinct separation of state and church.

Given such perceptions and the general changes in the European religious landscape, both the constitutional guarantee of RE in Germany (in accordance with article 7.3 of the basic German constitutional law – the Grundgesetz) and this newly developed form of ‘neutral’ RE in the German Swiss context, require new considerations about the theological and pedagogical legitimacy of RE. This especially holds true for institutions involved in RE teacher training which are part of (secular) theological faculties (such as those in Switzerland) or even part of denomination-based catholic or protestant theological faculties (such as those in Germany and Austria). In other words, the task is to develop an understanding of denominational *and* neutral models of RE which not only rely on scientific findings from pedagogy and religious studies, but also refer to certain theological insights, methods and perspectives.

However, it is important to stress here that such argumentation ‘in favour’ of a theological perspective only makes sense if theology is not understood as a discipline dependent on certain denominational or church-related interests and is of course seen as much more than a kind of ‘bible-study’practice. The scientific character of theology consists of historical, hermeneutical, ethical and personal approaches to the question ‘in which sense can the “idea and word of God” be identified in religious traditions, interpretations and practices.’

The perspective of a theologically-based religious pedagogy (as an academic discipline) gains its relevance and importance from a clear scientific approach to dealing appropriately with the complex issues of religion *and* education. Furthermore, in a *substantial* sense can theology become an important basis for raising fundamental questions of meaning within RE – be it by the teachers or by the students?

Under this presupposition, theology as science can contribute not only to the profile of RE as a school subject, but also to the general idea of ‘good’ and ‘life-serving’ (lebensdienlich)

education (cf. the theoretical reflections on the 'theologicity' (Theologizität) of religious education in Schlag & Suhner, 2017). A bridge towards the issue of human rights can be built from these remarks on the scientific character and the substantial contribution of theology:

Given the current burning global and local human rights issues, RE is capable of developing a specific powerful hermeneutical and dialogical relevance that cannot be achieved through any other subject. This is because ideas on the topic of human rights, which are relevant to our lives, can be stated and experienced in RE in a historical, hermeneutical, ethical and personal sense. In that sense, *human beings, their religious feelings and their religiously motivated search for meaning* become altogether significant at the centre of teaching. If so, then this underscores the general aim of theology: to help to understand in which sense human life can be understood as a lifelong search for meaning as a practice of religious self-orientation and dialogue. Can this aim already be identified in 'real' RE?

2. Human rights education in RE – standards and examples

In the school context, addressing human rights and their violation is – far beyond RE – a didactically complex matter. Within the framework of the UN Decade, a three-fold objective is given for human rights education (see. Mihr, 2005). This three-fold objective is connected analogously with a triple, and thus also an exciting, didactic objective:

1. *Cognitively*, to acquire a 'knowledge of the origin, norms and standards of human rights, their legal foundations as well as instruments' – i.e. learning *of* human rights (knowledge);

2. *Affectively*, to develop 'a sense of outrage at human rights violations and injustice due to a personal or passive experience of injustice' – i.e. learning *through* human rights (values);

3. From an *activity-oriented* perspective, to promote active action 'which involves the commitment to human rights' – i.e. learning *for* human rights (skills).

How can RE within this type of theological perspective support such differentiated human rights education? What is the productive power of this *specific approach*? To understand the basis of the following remarks, it is necessary to once again consider the situation in Germany. Nonetheless, my argument is that looking at this specific context sheds light paradigmatically on the required scientific standards of a 'good' RE in a common and much broader sense and this might therefore be inspiring for different educational and political contexts.

In the German context, strong evidence for the connection between education on religious values and human rights education has recently been provided in official statements relevant to

educational policy. In the context of the debate surrounding educational standards (Bildungsstandards), attention has been drawn to the specific form of rationality or 'constitutive rationality' of religion and philosophy, with whose help, according to Jürgen Baumert, 'ultimate questions' (Baumert, 2002, 107) can be dealt with. From the idea that religion deals with the basic anthropological question of the 'how, where and why of human life' (ibid.), this is also reflected in the competence debate on denominational RE (Fischer & Elsenbast, 2006, 13.19).

How is this now represented in guidelines and materials for RE? To begin with, human rights issues did not constitute a major topic in the materials and official curricula of denominational RE for a very long time. This obviously only changed in the early 1990s (cf. Heide, 1992). Since then, implicit and explicit references in many educational and school curricula, textbooks and teaching materials (see Schwendemann, 2010, 12) have increased in number. There are a number of notable examples.

In the Baden-Württemberg education plan for the teaching of 6th grade RE classes at secondary schools (Hauptschule/Werkrealschule) where the students are around 12 years old, the topic of 'creation and responsibility' can be found in the section on 'world and responsibility'. In this regard, it is stated, 'People are created as unique, equipped with dignity.' The following competences are derived from this: 'students can recognise their differences, respect each other and treat each other fairly. Students know biblical instructions for the action of mankind (the Ten Commandments) and know ways to resolve their conflicts peacefully.'

In relation to German grammar schools (Gymnasium), in this case we refer to the example of RE in 9/10th class, there is a close connection between the biblical message and individual action: students should 'include central ethical statements from the Bible in a standard critical judgement' [those mentioned include: the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, the double commandment of love, T.S.] and from this know the challenges 'for their own conduct of life and the shaping of society.'

In teaching material for secondary education published by W. Schwendemann (see Schwendemann, 2010), there are multiple instructions to firstly facilitate learning about the most important human rights and the underlying declarations in RE, 'students learn about human rights, relate them (through examples) to their world and know that the Bible speaks of how man's likeness to God is the basis of human rights' (Ding & Wagensommer 2010, 17). However, this explanation, which shall be clarified with reference to Psalm 8, is to a certain degree not linked very clearly to the preceding factual information on the development of human rights.

To summarise: although some close connections between human rights issues and religious issues can be identified, the approach appears to be lacking in terms of the complex interrelation of both these issues and especially thematising this interrelation from an explicitly theological (which is not identical with the biblical!) perspective. In other words, the human rights education standards of cognition, affection and active participation seem to be somehow matched and basic contents of the human rights issues are somehow related to religious tradition. However, it is necessary to ask whether all this is really approached in substantial depth. Thus, in the next section of this article some ideas on ways to *challenge theological reflection* on human rights education within RE shall be presented.

3. Theological-ethical considerations on contemporary human rights education

The following formulation serves as a theoretical starting point – as a kind of hermeneutical premise: RE in its theological and pedagogical aim represents a *facilitating practice both individually and collectively for the meaningful interpretation and conduct of life* (for further historical and systematic context see Schlag, 2010). The crucial question is what claim to validity can the theological meaning of 'the idea and word of God' make in relation to the cognitive, affective and activating ways of teaching human rights.

Approaching the 'idea and word of God' theologically opens up the dimension of the creaturely quality of humans in relation to God. The understanding of the human being as an image of God raises – from the perspective of a theological anthropology – the existential question about the beginning, conduct, meaning and end of life.

The debate surrounding the divine likeness of humans also has a kind of protective function which carries its own meaning in addition to any legal protection guaranteed by constitution and law. A theological perspective of this kind transcends the legal category of human dignity and human rights in a certain sense. This is not in the sense that it explains this as insignificant because of its possible lack of metaphysical legitimisation (Begründung), but rather in the sense that it demonstrates to humans, as creatures, their unconditional worthiness of protection in a specific light which is expressed in the theological metaphor of *justification* (Rechtfertigung). This can be understood as a theological form of legitimisation as the metaphor of *justification* which is at the core of the interpretation that every human being is the fallen and justified creation. Such theological understanding of justification can therefore be perceived as a specific *hermeneutical concept*, as it understands any human existence in *relation to God* and *in orientation towards God's word and presence*.

RE can therefore provide scope for the theological interpretation of the human being in the three-folded perspective *coram Deo*, *coram mundo* and *inter homines*. In this sense, human rights education in a religious dimension is, in the first and last sense, *personality education* in its *essential reference to trying to learn about God's relation to mankind.*

However, at this point and from a rather pedagogical perspective it has to be said that such a hermeneutical approach can only gain orienting power through modes of *free communication and free interpretation*. In a didactic sense, the basic theological and hermeneutical provision consequently requires further clarification.

4. Didactic consequences

The theological basis of the '*coram Deo-'*, *coram mundo'*- and '*inter homines'-perspectives* has strong didactic equivalents. Thinking about human dignity opens up a constructivist perspective of the individual learning processes related to the understanding of oneself, the world and the other. Such perspective represents the didactic manifestation of individual freedom in processing and experiencing one's own questions on how to conduct life in these different relationships to God, the world and the other. 'Good' RE is therefore characterised by the fact that communication about human dignity can take place in forms that are both discursive and open to the plurality of interpretations of the (religious and non-confessional) others – having his or her own individual rights and meaningful ways of life orientation. Thus, from a Christian-theological perspective, the discussion of *key problems* must be combined with a hermeneutical perspective on the theological and anthropological question of life conduct in relation to oneself and the others, and beyond that on the different religious traditions promoting such individual convictions and beliefs.

This type of value-based human rights education also raises the question of a *dignified and human-centred practice of school education as a whole.* For theological reasons, the fundamental difference between *life-serving* and *useful* educational processes must be highlighted and championed. This also means that any attempts by state, church and society to divert or functionalise religious education for certain (i.e. political or economic) interests must be strongly criticised. Thus, one of the future key credentials of RE is also to point to the original, deeply humane meaning and intention of holistic education. This also includes a critical examination of anthropological-technological conceptions of the human being (see Rat der EKD, 2003).

5. Summary of considerations

Secular discourses on the issue of dealing with human rights in the classroom context should not be taken as the only possible form of educational process and they themselves should be open to various profound categories of understanding and educating the human being. The principles of openness to legitimisation (Begründungsoffenheit) and mutual openness to dialogue about theological and humanistic conceptions of human rights must be emphasised, 'The concept of openness to legitimisation proves to be a middle ground, seeking to avoid the extremes of radical universalism and radical relativism' (Vögele, 2000, 490). This is something which the theoretical reflections from a secular pedagogical perspective and the different didactical models of secular RE are obviously lacking so far. Regarding the question of the universality of human rights, culturally specific forms of legitimisation should neither be ignored nor neglected.

An argument is therefore not being made for a theological legitimisation of human rights in the sense of an exclusivist foundation in a particular religious tradition, or under the heading of a particular, firmly defined guiding culture or an established denominational form of RE. However, an understanding of human rights as a regulative idea allows a specific interpretation and implementation in the respective political and educational culture: therefore, a *theological perspective* for teaching human rights seems to be well justified.

Reflection on human rights issues must explore ways of developing common interpretation skills in the context of a multireligious and multicultural society. Consequently, one of the main challenges for theology and religious studies will be to devise standards for good RE which serve our ways of living and which also integrate interreligious communication and understanding. Such programmatic openness to dialogue also requires secular and other religious human rights discourses to engage in a productive discussion with forms of legitimisation from the perspective of a Christian ethos.

For contemporary teaching, this means:

Only when RE, from its specific content perspective, develops a specific sensitivity to *humans' worthiness of protection and justification* will it prove to be of indispensable importance in the context of school and educational reality. The *profile* of school human rights education from a Christian-theological perspective is reflected in questions of individual and community value education from a *specific spirit of freedom* being conveyed clearly and bravely. Nevertheless, discussion and exchange between denominations and religions and their specific understanding of human rights is essential.

RE with an ecumenical and interreligious orientation must therefore also be able to include different theological (!) ideas about human rights, without representing an explicit or implicit claim of exclusive truth. In view of the increasing cultural and religious plurality of the current generation of young people, it must be considered how, in future, differing culturally influenced views of humans and understandings of human rights can be involved in value-oriented constructive discussions in the context of RE. In that case, RE provides the possibility of a culture of dialogue, so to speak, from its own viewpoint and ways of thinking about other perspectives are opened up from this position.

It is thereby essential to repeatedly bring one's own theological-ethical premises into the discussion. The didactic challenge is to communicate and maintain the Gospel's claim to truth in such a way that it is recognisable as a life-serving benchmark in the permanent dialectic of uniqueness and openness, freedom and self-commitment. Thus, good RE must not only consist of cognitive contents or produce certain affections or motivate participation. It must in a much broader and deeper sense aim to open up 'qualified' and substantial spaces for young people to communicate freely about their individual needs, hopes and desires.

Theologically *substantial* education processes are at least helpful for this, if not necessary, and this should be the case in denominational as well as in 'neutral' forms of RE. In other words, to think and talk about the substantial meaning of certain religious traditions in the classroom does not necessarily mean for the students that they need to be a member of a religious community or even to be religious. It rather means that they will only be able to grasp the deeper meaning of any religious tradition and its importance for dealing with human rights issues when they really get involved personally with these traditions. Such involvement must not be understood as a certain personal commitment to a certain religious tradition, but should be understood in itself as a pedagogical and theological virtue of 'good' RE.

Where this happens, both in the context of the respective class and school and in the wider public, the importance of the school subject of RE and its societal relevance can be made plausible, especially given that human rights has become a considerably more prominent and burning issue than ever before.

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Address of the author:
Prof. Dr. Thomas Schlag
Professor for Practical Theology
Faculty of Theology
Kirchgasse 9
CH-8001 Zurich