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# **Researching Religious Education in Switzerland:**

## **How to Interpret Classroom Processes in a “Teaching about”-Context**

Thomas Schlag, Zurich

### Introduction

Empirical research on Religious Education in Switzerland is until now and compared to other countries and contexts of RE rarely the case and can only hardly be detected. Nevertheless, we find ourselves in the midst of a very exciting situation – as well concerning the political processes as the challenges for academic teaching and research. It has to be mentioned that some recent political developments especially the harmonization of RE and its syllabi ahead for the whole of Switzerland are now making the situation more demanding but on the other side also challenging and most interesting.

I firstly name some reasons for the lack of broader empirical research, secondly give an overview of the current developments of RE in this context, thirdly present some approaches and insights of the few empirical studies on RE, that have been conducted so far and fourthly will come to some conclusions and develop possible consequences for future empirical research from there.

#### 1. The lack of empirical research on RE in Switzerland and possible reasons

Several reasons and a somehow for the so far lack of broader empirical research can be depicted – so developments have deeply to do with the “contextual setting” (cf. Knauth in this volume):

- 1) For a long time RE in class rooms was very clear a practice as a matter of course. Officially and legally since the 19<sup>th</sup> century in many cantons RE is officially run by the state, to be exact, by the cantonal authorities and local schools. But despite its confessional-neutral form it was for a long time organized and conducted in strong cooperation with church authorities and together with confessional-based teachers training institutions. RE in the sense of school practice and teacher training has therefore been somehow self-evident until about the 1990s. Until then no need was seen for further plausibilization or legitimization, neither by the state authorities nor by the churches not by the teachers themselves.
- 2) Over the last decades the Faculties of Theology in Switzerland missed a noticeable profile of academic Religious Pedagogy and have therefore not developed empirical

research – although Klaus Wegenast in Bern was one of the leading figures of the empirical turn!<sup>1</sup> Due to the fact that RE has long been a state-organized subject, the Faculties of Theology seem to have not been interested in any kind of deeper research. The connection between academic research and practice was indeed a very loose one and on the other hand the pedagogical institutes as institutes for teachers training had not been concerned with academic research.<sup>2</sup>

- 3) Within the school and political context, RE is, as far as I can reconstruct it, still not recognized as a “normal subject”, being of the same importance and on the same pedagogical level as all other subjects. Thus, all recent debates in the aftermath of the PISA-results and almost all academic research from the Departments of Education did hardly integrate the subject RE. So RE was so to say not on the screen of academic empirical research so far.
- 4) Due to the fact, that RE was and is organized not on a state-, but on the cantonal level, there has never been a common attention of the churches leading to certain pedagogical or didactical standards, not to mention the complete lack of central church-based pressure groups – comparable f.e. to the chamber of the EKD. The cantonal differentiations has made it difficult to agree f.e. about a nation-wide evaluation of RE. Also until now, there has not been a kind of professional platform, f.e. a specific Swiss journal on RE, dealing academically with the open questions. Only just recently the Swiss Church Council has established a small group of experts for the field of education in Church and schools and two new magazines for RE in Switzerland are currently establishing themselves – by the way from quite opposite directions.

All this led to the result that when political pressure started to be put on RE in the late 1990s, there were almost no empirical-based arguments, that could withstand these political dynamics – not to speak of any significant research on the practice, outcome and efforts of RE taught by ministers or catechets. Or to conclude with my Lucerne colleague Monika Jakobs, she said in 2007: „It has to be considered as a serious mistake, that over a long time the churches paid far

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<sup>1</sup> In a main article on RE in Switzerland empirical perspectives were not mentioned, cf. Klaus Wegenast: Religion in Schweizer Schulen, in: *Informationes Theologiae Europae. Internationales ökumenisches Jahrbuch für Theologie* 1 (1992), 301-314.

<sup>2</sup> The latest volume on the development and challenges of RE in Switzerland lacks completely any empirical dimension, cf. Sophia Bietenhard/Dominik Helbling/Kuno Schmid (Hg.), *Ethik, Religionen, Gemeinschaft. Ein Studienbuch*. Bern 2015.

too little attention on professional training of the teachers of RE .... This lack of professional education – and I add the lack of empirically valid results (T.S.) – has led to the fact that the RE teachers had to fight for integration and acknowledgment. The consequences of the lack of a theoretical basis and of the non-professionell training are now leading to massive negative impacts in terms of school policy.”<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The current situation of RE in Switzerland – the shift to new forms of RE in schools

Since the first decade of the 2000s in many Swiss cantons a major shift towards a religious neutral and state-based RE can be observed. The churches have in many cantons not only lost their influence and responsibility for the subject, but also ministers and catechets were not accepted and allowed to teach RE any longer. Interesting enough, the reasons for these shifts were not justified from a clear empirical basis but rather from certain perceptions and assumptions, connected to general societal tendencies within Swiss society. Not even Jürgen Oelkers, the Zurich educationalist, and one of the protagonists of the new subject, has in his various statements ever argued for the need of a new RE from a clear empirical basis. The reason why secular Departments of Education also in cooperation with the academic discipline of Religious Studies claimed for responsibility, was nevertheless supported by arguments, which can somehow be called empirical.

I will in short name four of the key – somehow empirical – arguments, mainly concentrating on the developments in Zurich over the last ten years:

- 1) The argument for the change from the so-called confessional-cooperative RE to Religion and Culture was underlined by the fact of demographic changes, a growing multicultural and multireligious population in the class rooms (the pluralism-argument).
- 2) In connection to this, a somehow empirical argument was raised, which focused on the historical developments of RE since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In that line it was estimated as somehow consequent to finish the continuation line of a confessional RE and to change into a non-confessional RE. As some kind of empirical argumentation, it was said that Switzerland would have become itself a secularized and laizistic society and country, so that the model of the strong separation of Church and state as in the French-speaking

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<sup>3</sup> Monika Jakobs, Ist Zweigleisigfahren der Dritte Weg? Aktuelle Entwicklungen des schulischen Religionsunterrichts in der Schweiz, in: Theo-Web. Zeitschrift für Religionspädagogik 6 (2007), H. 1, 123-133, 131.

cantons should also be transferred into the cantons where cooperation between state and church was still the case, the Swiss-German cantons (the secularization-argument).

- 3) As a side-argument of these aspects, educationalists also raised the point, that the real classroom teaching was dissatisfying– they assumed a massive lack of pedagogical knowledge amongst the ministers and catechets, who are teaching the subject without taking into consideration the societal developments and required pedagogical standards. Just to remind: for this assumption no clear empirical basis has ever been developed or presented.

Finally it has to be mentioned that the protagonists of a new form of RE also named positive reasons: RE should prevent the loss of cultural knowledge and identity, the loss of values and the loss of religion in the sense of an important societal issue – but again, whether RE in the obligatory “teaching-about”-form would be able to provide this, was not tested beforehand.

Behind these perceptions and assumptions at least two strong strategies can be identified: Firstly, the clear political strategy and conviction that all cooperative forms of church and state should come to an end and secondly the strong aim of the secular academic institutions like the Pädagogische Hochschulen as well as the departments of Religious Studies to see themselves in the lead of future teacher training.

And again, this has to be seen in combination with the fact, that in most cantons the churches themselves did not show significant interest in this field of religious education, even if they had invested intensely in a series of teaching books and material for RE around the year 2000. Teaching material has been developed but without a real basis of empirical understanding; the testing and use of it has obviously been done in the mode of “trial and error”. So not a lot has been known or is known about the real practice of RE and its impacts. There are still no clear results on the practice and the outcome of RE, not to mention the impact of teaching books and materials.

In other words: the change of RE within the Swiss school context has so far merely been influenced by political reasons but not by a clear knowledge about the real practice of RE. Changes of the systems have not been motivated by the real RE, but by a certain political intention to change the confessional-based RE and to undermine the new didactic approach of a “teaching about” in the frame of an obligatory, religious neutral subject RE.

### 3. Starting points of empirical research

Nevertheless, within recent years, some empirical analysis of RE have come underway. New academic attention came with the change of the RE systems in the different cantons. Interesting enough, they have not been conducted merely “by chance” but marked also some educational and political intensions. Interestingly enough, in their chronological appearance they also mark the recent developments of the debate about RE in Switzerland.<sup>4</sup>

Even if it is not a history of crime and murder – at least not so far – it depicts the intense debates about who within the academic field claims for the interpretation power of RE. Not astonishing that some of them seem to be somehow politically based and biased. So in my short reconstructions I will also try to identify the general question of how RE is understood here in a broader sense!

Just to start with it here: so far empirical research on RE in Switzerland has in most cases not really entered the classrooms yet. A clear focus lies on the analyses of the historical backgrounds of RE on Switzerland and reflections on the juridical aspects of the new model. And wherever empirical research has been conducted, it was so far mainly concentrated on the RE-teachers and on responsible persons from education authorities.

#### 1) Maurice Baumann et al.: RE-teachers in the Cantone Berne (2004)<sup>5</sup>

In 2004 Maurice Baumann from the Theological faculty in Berne published results from qualitative interviews with about 400 RE-teachers in the Canton Bern: The background of this study was that though the relatively clear and stable demographic situation in the canton of Berne especially due to migration especially in urban regions a growing tendency of religious pluralization was observed. This had in the 1990s led to a new school law and put also some severe pressure on RE. The subject RE, already differentiated into “Religion – Ethics – Life orientation” (“Religion-Mensch-Ethik/Religion-Lebenskunde” (RME/RE) was integrated into a new subject “nature – mankind – environment” (“Natur-Mensch-Mitwelt” (NMM)). Baumanns research, conducted already in 1998, asked whether due to these developments the subject and issue of “religion” could get lost. Obviously the teachers themselves valued religion still as a very important issue. Therefore the authors conclude, that the practice of RE is “not in a phase of ultimate erosion, but of a complete reconstruction”. The authors from the department

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<sup>4</sup> The first survey on the broad variety of different models was done by Andrea Belliger, Staatlicher und kirchlicher Religionsunterricht an den öffentlichen Schulen der deutschweizer Kantone, Luzern (70 S.). (2000, 2. Auflage 2002). It showed the plurality of RE in Switzerland concerning models, teachers training etc. and can therefore be estimated as an empirical study, but not a subject-matter didactical analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Maurice Baumann u.,a., Baustelle Religion. Eine empirische Untersuchung zum schulischen Religionsunterricht im Kanton Bern. Bern u.a. 2004.

of Practical theology supported therefore and legitimized a practice of RE in schools, which should abstain from explicitly religious or even christian contents, which had been protested against by the churches when the new subject had been implemented. By the way, the main author Maurice Baumann himself had his origins in the French-speaking parts of Switzerland and was obviously much more familiar and sympathetic with the separation between church and state.

## 2) Evaluation of Islamic religious education (2004)<sup>6</sup>

Since 2002/2003 Islamic RE is established in primary schools of two communities in the canton Lucerne. This did not only lead to intense public debates but also to an empirical evaluation in the year 2004. The report was based on group interviews with responsible persons, parents and students, also with key persons from the schools, church parishes and communities, and also on analyses of literature and documents. The report concludes that Islamic RE has the potential to integrate muslims into the Swiss society, so it signled clearly, that a certain confessional form of RE would contribute positively to the social environment. Though, these results had no further impact for establishing Islamic RE in a broader sense.<sup>7</sup> This might be the reason why until now only a very few schools in Switzerland offer forms of Islamic RE at all.

## 3) Katharina Frank: Arguing for an obligatory RE in the perspective of “teaching about” (2004ff)<sup>8</sup>

Probably the strongest argumentation for a new, obligatory RE in the “teaching-about” perspective, also connected with empirical research, was done by Katharina Frank, from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Zurich.

It tried to serve the idea that a complete change of RE from any confessional to a neutral obligatory form was needed to meet the challenges of the religiously plural Swiss society. So her research was clearly marked by the intention to make plausible the new form of a “teaching about” – and by the way to argue for Religious studies as the main subject-related reference for the new subject.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Elke-Nicole Kappus (Zentrum für interkulturellen Dialog (CID)/ Swiss Academy for Development (SAD) im Auftrag von VIOKL, Luzern, Islamischer Religionsunterricht im Schulhaus. Ein Projekt in Kriens und Ebikon. Ein Evaluationsbericht. Luzern 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. M. Jakobs, Ist Zweigleisigfahren der Dritte Weg? Aktuelle Entwicklungen des schulischen Religionsunterrichts in der Schweiz, in: Theo-Web. Zeitschrift für Religionspädagogik 6 (2007), H. 1, 123-133.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Katharina Frank, Schulischer Religionsunterricht. Eine religionswissenschaftlich-soziologische Untersuchung. Stuttgart 2010.

Her research has undoubtedly come as near to classroom situations as no other recent empirical study so far:

Her main interest was to detect, how RE in real classroom processes was conducted, which contents were brought in by the teachers and how they coped with the religious plurality in the classrooms. Therefore she chose the method of an “open, not participatory (passive) observation” of RE in primary and lower secondary classes (with students of the age 8 to 12) – altogether 14 lessons, followed by semi-structured interviews with the teachers (2004-2006). From her observations of the classroom communication and the teachers self-descriptions she develops a typology of very different forms of how religion is taught by the RE teachers.

To understand her approach, it is necessary to also at least in brief mention her specific understanding of religion. She refers to religion not in a substantial, but in a functional sense, not primarily as individual phenomenon, but as a cultural source.

So she differentiates between a confessional model with the didactical form of a dogmatic teaching and a kind of normative-oriented participation of the students – an interreligious model with the didactical form of a life-oriented “teaching from” and a kind of subjective participation of the students - and finally a knowledge-based model with the didactical form of a “teaching about” and, what she calls an open participation of the students. She herself was and is clearly in favor of the third form, arguing from the basis of religious neutrality and the idea of negative freedom of religion, guaranteed by the Swiss constitution.

A few years later, this model was indeed tested for the first evaluation of the new subject “Religion and Culture”, but in its methodology and results strongly criticised not only by the legal authorities but also by the Berlin educationalist Dietrich Benner, who had been asked to evaluate this evaluation. His main counterargument is, that the empirical approach is rather deductive, deriving from a certain interest than actually inductive in the sense of a non-prejudiced observation of the real classroom processes. Or as he puts it by criticizing Franks typology: the idea of a neutral subject in the sense of a pure “teaching about”-RE is not only insupportable, but misses pedagogically and didactically the whole concept of RE, which also have to integrate the individual religious experiences and interpretations in the sense of a “learning from”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Dietrich Benner, „Religion und Kultur“. Zur Zürcher Konzeption für ein neues Unterrichtsfach und den Ergebnissen seiner Evaluation, in: Ders., *Bildung und Religion. Nur einem bildsamen Wesen kann ein Gott sich offenbaren*, Paderborn, 106-113.



4) Monika Jakobs et al.: Motivations of teachers in confessional RE<sup>10</sup> (2009)

As a part of the first European TRES-(Teaching Religion in a multicultural European Society) project the Swiss study asked in 2006/2007 in a quantitative survey about 500 teachers in cantons, where confessional (reformed or catholic) RE was still the case. They were asked about their professional background, motivations and aims of teaching RE. Again a certain message goes along with the presentation of the results:

The authors conclude that a confessional-based and a “teaching about”-RE are not necessarily in contradiction with each other. Because the teachers in confessional RE show already a high professionalism to deal with religious plurality and no tendencies to exclusivist or inclusivist attitudes of religious superiority. This leads the authors to the conclusion, that the teachers’ attitudes minimize prejudices against confessional RE. Confessional RE can therefore contribute to a difference-competence in the perspective of a truly modern RE. The authors also argue that instead of speaking of religious neutrality the teachers should be trained to develop a self-understanding of their own religious standpoint and its historic-cultural embedding as well as the practice of active tolerance (124).

5) Dominik Helbling: Subject-oriented and competence based religious didactics (2010)<sup>11</sup>

In line with this research one of the authors of this study, Dominik Helbling, developed in his Dissertation, published in 2010 from the background of the competence-debate, how religious competence could be and become a core perspective for RE in the context of the plural Swiss society. On the basis of 13 qualitative episodic interviews according to Flick (1529, which are analyzed by the method of grounded theory, he draws the following consequences: A competence-based RE helps young people, whose certainties are at stake, to orientate themselves in this situation. He therefore favors a form of “life-oriented” (lebensweltlich) RE, which makes young people competent to deal with religious plurality.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Dominik Helbling/Monika Jakobs/Ulrich Riegel, Switzerland. Educational pluralism in confessional religious education, in: Hans-Georg Ziebertz/Ulrich Riegel (Hg.): How Teachers in Europe Teach Religion. An international empirical study in 16 countries, Berlin 2009, 227-240; Thomas Engelberger/Dominik Helbling/Monika Jakobs, Konfessioneller Religionsunterricht in multireligiöser Gesellschaft. Eine empirische Studie für die deutschsprachige Schweiz, Zürich 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Dominik Helbling, Religiöse Herausforderung und religiöse Kompetenz. Empirische Sondierungen zu einer subjektorientierten und kompetenzbasierten Religionsdidaktik, Wien 2010.

## 6) Ansgar Jödicke: The societal relevance of RE and the responsibility for it (2011)<sup>12</sup>

In the framework of a large National Research Project NFP 58 “Religion and Society”, which was launched in 2005, started 2007 and finished in 2011, Ansgar Jödicke from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Fribourg asked for the societal relevance of RE for public education and society.

Firstly he and his team compared different didactical models in several cantons – the ones that had implemented new forms of RE: Aargau, Freiburg, Neuenburg, Tessin, Waadt und Zürich – and secondly conducted and analyzed more than 100 interviews with cantonal educational authorities, representatives of the religious communities and RE teachers, focusing on the question of their specific responsibility for RE.

From the observation, that church and state are still somehow intertwined in this field of education, he comes to at least two politically interesting solutions: first, concerning the contents for the curricula, the religious communities should involve themselves and should be involved; concerning the pedagogical concepts, the educational authorities should have the decision-making power. And this perspective comes along with another claim: „Attention has to be drawn to the question, whether Christian Religious Pedagogy can at all speak as a pedagogical discipline or if it not rather has to be considered as a discipline of Christian theology”.<sup>13</sup>

## 7) Examining RE teacher trainers<sup>14</sup>

Just recently Andrea Rota and Petra Bleisch Bouzar, both members from Departments of Religious studies have published an article on the RE teacher trainers in Switzerland. So in a certain sense they have started to look into classrooms, but not of the schools but of the academic institutions. In a small empirical qualitative research they try to detect the professional ethos of these teachers’ teachers – in other words: how do they deal with the demand of protecting the negative freedom of religion and how do they deal with the tension of still doing RE in the current environment where the Christian tradition is still quite evident and on the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ansgar Jödicke, Unterricht zum Thema Religion an der öffentlichen Schule. Untersuchung im Rahmen des NFP 58 “Religionsgemeinschaften, Staat und Gesellschaft” Schlussbericht, Bern 2010, [[http://www.nfp58.ch/files/downloads/Joedicke\\_Schule\\_Schlussbericht\\_def.pdf](http://www.nfp58.ch/files/downloads/Joedicke_Schule_Schlussbericht_def.pdf)]

<sup>13</sup> Schlussbericht, 16. Another research project within this framework has at least to be mentioned here: Das Forschungsprojekt «Religion und Ethnizität – eine Untersuchung mit jungen Erwachsenen», lead by Janine Dahinden, Universität Neuenburg, Karenina Kollmar-Paulenz and Doris Wastl-Walter, Universität Bern, cf. [www.nfp.58.ch](http://www.nfp.58.ch) > Projekte > Jugendliche, Schule und Religion.

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Rota/Petra Bleisch Bouzar, Representations and concepts of professional ethos among Swiss religious education teacher trainers, in: British Journal of Religious Education 38 (2016), 75-92.

other hand respect the religious plurality. They conclude with identifying again different types of teaching according to the specific representations of religion – be it a scientific orientation, a social orientation or an existential orientation. And they explicitly hint at the need for further research to “evaluate different didactical practices” – according to these different types of teaching.

#### 4. Conclusions and future empirical perspectives – How to Interpret Classroom Processes in a “Teaching about”-Context

Concerning the issues of this Symposium, the “incomes and outcomes”, the impacts on the students views and their attitudes towards religion as well as the real processes of RE, no empirical work about RE in Switzerland has been conducted so far. So the quality and effectiveness of the new model of RE has not be put to the test yet but has to in the very near future.

It is obvious that academic research only on textbooks, teachers’ aims or curricula is definitely not sufficient to justify RE as an mandatory subject on the long run. Behind the different empirical approaches a kind of hidden curriculum consisting of certain educational and didactical policies and also of a certain normative understanding of religion can be detected. But such somehow one-sided approaches of research with strong didactical presuppositions are limited in itself. It seems that the political debates about the new model of RE has bound a lot of the energies of all actors in the field, which left only little space for deeper empirical research.

So now that the main political and didactical debates about RE have come to an end it seems time to focus on real empirical research, hopefully in projects that bring together the different perspectives and interests. In other words: Empirical work might offer very good chances to overcome the political gaps and to bring the different perspectives closer to each other.

In this respect it will also be necessary and fruitful to search amongst the disciplines of Education, Religious studies and Theology for common ground and to integrate their subject-specific expertise.

This seems important especially for dealing empirically as well as hermeneutically with the complex analyses and interpretations about what is really going on in classrooms. This opens up challenges and opportunities also for international cooperation and comparison. To say it finally more in concrete:

Last year, a new research program on subject-matter didactics has been launched by the Swiss University Council, and the Faculty of Theology Zurich will due to a successful application also participate here with a research project on interreligious competences in RE in cooperation with the Pädagogische Hochschule St. Gallen: „Aufbau der wissenschaftlichen Kompetenzen in den Fachdidaktiken“ (Swiss universities 2017-2020): “Kompetenzzentrum Interreligiöses Lernen in der Aus- und Weiterbildung von Lehrpersonen.”

There are plans of an international comparative study on how Remembrance and the Holocaust is raised as an issue in RE in different countries and contexts, asking RE teachers about their motivations, specific hermeneutical approaches and methods, including the possible impacts on the students themselves.

There are plans of an international comparative study on how teachers in different contexts are teaching Islam in RE of secondary schools, and which motivations, aims and experiences can be identified, also in terms of interreligious competence and learning.

These are just three examples of future research, which could and should also open up the field for deeper class room research in the nearer future.