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## BETWEEN SUNDAY SCHOOL AND NON-CONFESSIONAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The new comprehensive plan for religious education in the  
Canton of Zurich

### I CHANGES IN PROCESS IN SOCIETY AND CHURCH

What are the consequences for a protestant folk church (*Volkskirche*) and its congregational life when state religious education no longer offers a place to build religious trust? What can the church's activity still build upon when religious education in the school is consciously supra-confessional, neutral and primarily factually oriented? And how can people find a home in Christian faith when not only the school but the parental home as well is becoming less and less a source of orientation in such questions? It must also be asked, how are we to cope with the fact that possibly in the coming years the Reformed church in Switzerland will unavoidably become poorer, older and smaller?<sup>1</sup>

It is the specific experience of such undeniably precarious changes that underlies the vision of an intensive and comprehensive church provision for socialization in the Reformed church of the Canton of Zurich: religious education in the primary and secondary state schools has been consciously so conceived through various fundamental decisions about educational policy in recent years that any attempt to root children in a particular religious tradition was no longer possible.

Across the board »religious education for all« is now only given by state-trained and qualified teachers who teach the compulsory subject of »religion and culture« in a religiously neutral way, and in it are supposed above all to mediate the essential contents and traditions of the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. STOLZ / E. BALLIF, *Die Zukunft der Reformierten. Gesellschaftliche Megatrends. Kirchliche Reaktionen* (Zürich 2010); about the broader practical-theological challenges cf. T. SCHLAG, *Öffentliche Kirche* (Zürich 2012).

five world religions. On programmatic grounds, teachers who have acquired their competence at such places as theological faculties or church educational institutions should no longer be used on the public school scene because they are not trusted to have the officially necessary and allegedly possible religious neutrality. Yet this is not the only – and one may suspect not even the primary – reason for this new departure in religious education on the part of the Reformed church of The Canton of Zurich.

Various demographic surveys in the last forty years have shown that in parental homes an acute breakdown of religious tradition is to be registered: In the city of Zurich the proportion of Reformed Protestants sank from 53% in 1970 to 30.3% in the year 2000 – tendency further sinking. Altogether in the Swiss Federation the proportion of children up to 9 years old without any religious adherence increased ten times between 1970 and 2000. Religious sociology detects a general trend in Switzerland for traditional Christian religiosity to lose its importance while fundamentalisms, spiritualization and religious pluralism are gaining some ground.<sup>2</sup> Thus it also holds good for the Swiss context that the loss in the plausibility of family religiosity represents the main cause »of the currently manifest loss of Christianity and the bond to the church in the rising generation«.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the financial basis – after all, companies in the Canton of Zurich still pay indirect church tax – much is becoming shaky in the folk church, as is not least clearly apparent in the degree of presence of the rising generation at worship and other services offered by the church congregations, e.g. youth groups and youth work.

Certainly it is still to be observed that for the majority of the population the bond to a tradition or religious community remains a constitutive element of social and personal identity: »Religion is today a private and a public affair«, whereby »the individual and collective formation of the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. BAUMANN / J. STOLZ, *Religiöse Vielfalt in der Schweiz: Zahlen, Fakten, Trends*, in IDEM (ed.), *Eine Schweiz – viele Religionen. Risiken und Chancen des Zusammenlebens* (Bielefeld 2007), 63–64.

<sup>3</sup> F.-X. KAUFMANN, *Die Entwicklung von Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft*, in *Religion – Kirche – Islam. Eine soziale und diakonische Herausforderung*, ed. K. D. HILDEMAN (Leipzig 2003), 28.

religious self takes place in a social context in which belonging to a community of faith retains significance for the majority of the population«. <sup>4</sup> This is shown not least in the annual number of confirmands, which remains stable at a high level and as a rule comprises some 60% to 80% of the young Reformed people who come in question. <sup>5</sup>

At the same time it is also the case – and church work with children can connect with this: »At a fundamental level the alternative to faith is not non-faith, rather the existential question about faith – in the balance, admittedly. This attitude is not the prelude to abandoning all religious resources, rather [...] a posture of expectation, an unfinished search outside the framework marked off by the religious organizations«. <sup>6</sup>

To this extent the church's initiative for a comprehensive plan for religious education (*religionspädagogisches Gesamtkonzept*, hereafter: *rpg*) in the Canton of Zurich does not merely represent the luxury of a »special offer«, but marks a deliberate strategy for educational policy in view of the current developments indicated or a thoroughly positive and creative *ultima ratio* in view of the observed breakdown of tradition or the consequences to be feared from a folk church's becoming poorer in theological content as well as from a thinning of congregational life.

## 2 »FROM THE CRADLE [...]« – ON THE PROFILE OF CHURCH SOCIALIZATION IN THE CANTON OF ZÜRICH

*Rpg* was approved by the Synod of the Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich in 2004 following an extensive process of consultation and participation. <sup>7</sup> Thus was implemented a far-reaching – and, n. b., compulsory or obligatory – provision for church educational work in the congrega-

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<sup>4</sup> C. BOVAY / R. BROQUET, *Religionslandschaft in der Schweiz. Bundesamt für Statistik* (Neuchâtel 2004), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. T. SCHLAG / R. VOIROL-STURZENEGGER (ed.), *Konfirmationsarbeit im Kanton Zürich. Erkenntnisse – Herausforderungen – Perspektiven* (Zurich 2010).

<sup>6</sup> R. J. CAMPICHE, *Die zwei Gesichter, Faszination und Entzauberung* (Zurich 2004), 128. On the interpretation A. DUBACH / B. FUCHS, *Ein neues Modell von Religion. Zweite Schweizer Sonderfallstudie – Herausforderung für die Kirchen* (Zurich 2005).

<sup>7</sup> On background and profile cf. [www.rpg-zh.ch](http://www.rpg-zh.ch).

tions, through which it was intended to take up and process current challenges in society and church and changes in situations of family life better than in the past. Through the establishment of *rpg* it was the desire of the Reformed Church in the Canton of Zurich to connect in its own with similar intentions and corresponding educational provisions of other Swiss folk churches in recent years.<sup>8</sup> Connected with this was and is the basic idea, certainly not simply to dissolve existing church provisions like the classical Sunday school (where it even still existed), yet to introduce alongside this type of voluntary arrangement a clearly structured conception to be established more or less evenly over and above the individual congregational level.

Thus there emerged under the title »Growing up – new departures« a plan comprehending a church structure providing for the youth from birth to early adulthood: *rpg* aims to offer children a home to grow up in and to make young people competent to move on into their own responsible life (of faith). For this, church living spaces are to be opened up in which children and young people can find themselves as personalities and significant members of the congregation. Through a recognizable and malleable »local church« as well as familiar faces and spaces children and young people are to find a home. To this extent *rpg* is extended holistically and inter-generationally. Religious learning is understood as learning *from experiences, in relationships and through taking on responsibility*. With and through religious contents developmental steps appropriate to the children's ages are to be encouraged, which *rpg* distinguishes in the following sense: finding oneself – living in relationship – knowing one's roots – expressing one's faith – widening one's vision – acting responsibly. With this, the plan reflects a clearly recognizable general tendency towards the strengthening of Reformed identity in the German Swiss churches. This can also be generally formulated: precisely because in Switzerland the basis for universal school religious education will not for much longer be self-evident, there are at present

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Reformierte Kirchen Bern – Jura – Solothurn (ed.), *Wegleitung für die Kirchliche Unterweisung vom 14.2.1994* (Position of 21 Febr 2000); Reformierte Landeskirche Aargau (ed.), *Projekt Pädagogisches Handeln, Bulletin Nr. 15*, 30 August 1996; Evangelische Landeskirche des Kantons Thurgau (ed.), *Konzept und Verordnung »Kirche, Kind und Jugend«* (Frauenfeld 1999).

extensive initiatives under way in various Swiss cantonal churches. At the same time *rpg* shows various cantonal specifics, for example with regard to the legal basis, the possibilities for financing and the intensity of the extension and carrying-through of the »Zurich model«; these should be dealt with briefly here in order to enable a better estimate of the profile, opportunities and risks of such a new departure by the church.

*Rpg* divides the activity of religious education into four stages: pre-school (birth to the 8<sup>th</sup> year), primary school (8-12 years), the period till confirmation (12 to 16 years) and young adulthood (16 to 25 years).

The aim of these four phases is to make the young people at home in faith in a way that is close to the family and appropriate to their age and to accompany them in their lives. Each of the four phases is specially marked by a particular form of expression:

- In the pre-school period children are introduced to *celebrating*.
- In the primary school period the emphasis is on *learning*: this takes place not only in weekly classes but also in project days or so-called »camps«, i. e. youth retreats or other project-shaped activities.
- In the period before confirmation *sharing* comes especially to the fore. In this phase meeting and community stand in the centre.
- The period following confirmation is understood as a special time of *shaping*. The young people largely determine for themselves how their further religious path in and with the church or congregation should look and how it can be shaped on their own responsibility.

*Rpg* does not make everything quite new; rather the already existing church provisions are integrated in what is now a more clearly discernible overall structure. Thus church religious education in the primary school already previously included 30 hours (of 60 minutes) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> class. This should now be extended in stages within ten years to include 30 hours in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 30 hours in the 4<sup>th</sup> and, as the last stage, 30 hours in the 5<sup>th</sup> till 7<sup>th</sup> class. To this is added the already existing preparation for confirmation in the 9<sup>th</sup> class, which amounts to 72 hours.

Attendance at these (in all 192) hours of church religious and confirmation classes will count after the introduction of *rpg* has been completed as the condition for admission to confirmation, and is therefore obligatory for children who wish to let themselves be confirmed at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> class.<sup>9</sup>

Following the anchoring of this obligatory provision in the law of the church, the congregations are to implement this structure in their work and provide it, using the special teaching materials developed for it.

According to estimates of the church department responsible for »Education und Animation«, some 90% of the roughly 150 Reformed congregations in the Canton of Zurich have in the meantime introduced the programme for the 4<sup>th</sup> class. The teaching in the 2<sup>nd</sup> class has at present been introduced in about 20% of the congregations. In the summer of 2011 *rpg* enters its next stage of expansion, the programme for the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> class level. It is planned that the total concept will be so far advanced by 2016 that by then all the required teaching materials are available and the necessary teachers trained in adequate numbers.

The time-scale, the extensive teaching materials and the detailed training and further education in this area make it clear that the Zurich Cantonal Church was not aiming only to begin a temporary educational project but to set a comprehensive socialization initiative under way. This is also impressively confirmed by the extent of financial and personal resources assigned, after all several million Swiss francs per year.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. on this the corresponding regulations: »The church congregations offer obligatory and voluntary provisions for religious education. The central church administration determines the themes of the obligatory provision for religious education according to the resolutions of the church synod« (Art. 70); »Children up to 8 years are introduced to the basic forms of the faith and the church year. A deepened basic knowledge of the faith is mediated to children from 8 to 12 years. They are helped to find language and expression for faith. The obligatory provision of religious education for children from 8 to 12 years comprises at least 120 hours, divided into a minimum of 30 hours in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> as well as 30 hours in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> class. Services suitable for children and young people are part of the provision« (Art. 71); »Young people from 12 years to confirmation are accompanied on the search for their own mature faith and a life in Christian responsibility. The obligatory provision of religious education for young people from 12 years to confirmation comprises at least 72 hours« (Art. 72), *Kirchenordnung der Evangelisch-reformierten Landeskirche des Kantons Zürich, in Antrag und Bericht des Kirchenrates an die Kirchensynode betreffend neue Kirchenordnung, 9 April 2008.*

### 3 REALITY IN SKETCHES – MAKING THE CONCEPT CONCRETE

The comprehensive teaching materials which have appeared in the form of school books and teaching materials (the latter running altogether to 1300 pages!) for the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and most recently the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> class<sup>10</sup> correspond with their total of 20 thematic units to the *rpg* framework plan. These are divided into:

- 2<sup>nd</sup> school year: »We belong together« – »The Church – a Special House«  
- »Advent, Christmas and Jesus' Childhood« – »Biblical Stories of Pilgrimage« – »God's Beautiful World«;
- 3<sup>rd</sup> school year: »Baptism« – »The Lord's Prayer« – »Holy Communion« – »Pentecost«;
- 4<sup>th</sup> school year: »Study Project Bible« – »Primal Histories – Primal Truths« – »Living in Trust in God« – »Who is Jesus?« – »Our Church lives with Symbols«;
- 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> school year: »The Prophet Jeremiah« – »Paul – Life as a Christian« – »The Zurich Reformation« – »Worldwide Church – Worldwide Solidarity« – »Meeting other Living Worlds« – »Models for Life offer Orientation«.

Throughout the individual thematic units the additional materials follow the regular pattern of a theological and religious educational introduction, an tabular overview of the ways the course runs or could run in units of 90 minutes or alternatively 45 minutes, further background information for the teacher, e. g. on the interpretation of a biblical passage or on the theology and history of a theme or on the recommended materials as well as suggestions for reading. Usually detailed information sheets are included.

In particular the school books also contain, alongside many kinds of illustration and text, many »empty pages« as well, which are meant to be filled in independent creative work during a course unit. Great emphasis

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<sup>10</sup> Evangelisch-reformierte Landeskirche des Kantons Zurich (ed.), *minichile. Wir gehören zusammen. Arbeitshilfe und Schülerbuch 2. Schuljahr*; *3. Klass-Unti. Wir leben Kirche. Arbeitshilfe und Schülerbuch 3. Schuljahr*; *Club 4. Wir entdecken die Bibel. Arbeitshilfe und Schülerbuch 4. Schuljahr* (Zurich 2008); *JuKi. Wir glauben in Vielfalt. Arbeitshilfe 5.-7. Schuljahr* (Zurich 2011).

is placed on singing and praying together, and so in the materials numerous songs and prayers are also to be found. The aim here is certainly that these songs and prayers should also be learnt by heart. Much weight is also placed on creative, action-oriented approaches to the individual themes. So many suggestions are to be found for making up role games and developing little theatre scenes, speech choir motets or pictorial representation of the stories and symbols thematized.

A special feature of *rpg* is its view of the developmental differences between boys and girls. So the planning also visualizes sequences separated by gender. With respect to the educational perspective it should be mentioned that church religious education as envisaged in *rpg* makes no difference between different educational levels. So the structured educational provision in *rpg* is meant to realize »religious formation for all«, i. e. for all who belong to the Reformed church – note that for this Reformed understanding of the rules of church membership it is not primarily baptism which is the decisive criterion, but simply the entering of the children in the relevant register at the registry office or the equivalent declaration of confessional adherence.

Within the horizon of the church as the community of believers the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper play an important part in all phases. Through the intensive thematization the children should learn to know various approaches to these visible signs of the graciousness of God and of faith. Additionally, through these themes and the corresponding celebrations of services of baptism and communion a contact network should early be established between children, parents and the church as well as between the parents and their children. Baptism and communion are expressly thematized in the courses for the 3<sup>rd</sup> class. In the remembering of baptism and sharing in the celebration of communion the children should know themselves as accepted by God and learn at the same time that these gifts of God are also relevant for their behaviour towards their fellow human beings. So in the 4<sup>th</sup> class communion is to be celebrated as a Christian symbol of sharing, whereby the young people can and should join in shaping the celebration. Meeting the sacraments in this way with all their senses is seen at the same time as the foundation for a later mature confession and the assumption of responsibility within the church. This particular diaconal dimension is made specific in many ways in the teaching aids for the 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> class, first by



taking up examples in the Bible and the history of the church of those who set themselves against injustice and need, second through initiating specific diaconal projects in the social space of their own congregation, and third through the presentation of exemplary persons of faith who strove for justice and solidarity, such as Florence Nightingale, Albert Schweitzer or Martin Luther King.

In general the developed teaching plans and the recommended pattern of the classes repeatedly show the intention to link religious themes and contents with the children's capacities to imagine and realize as marked by developmental psychology in such a way that the teaching can be felt to be related to life and relevant to it; the transition is to be seen here both in the themes and tasks as also in the newly published working materials for the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> class.

#### 4 »LEARNING FROM ZURICH [...]»? – RPG PERSPECTIVES FOR OTHER CHURCH CONTEXTS

Particularly in view of the conditions in The Canton of Zurich, those of educational policy mentioned above, but also the financial, the situation can hardly be transferred one-to-one to the circumstances in the German *Landeskirchen* or in other European countries. In Germany it can still be assumed in view of the constitutional guarantee of religious education (Art 7,3 of the German *Grundgesetz*) that in religious education in schools meetings with the Protestant tradition of faith will be enabled and their influence be effective in forming identity – quite apart from the fact that there church staff (still) have their self-evident place in school life. To that extent it seems at a first glance neither necessary nor sensible to lay out a similarly intensive overall plan as is the case in Zurich and other Swiss cantonal churches. In other regions the possibilities for comparable start-up financing and the corresponding equipping of personnel are likely to be simply missing, so that it must be asked whether elsewhere similar extensive investment packets could be made up at all. But the question is also whether such packets must be provided at all or whether quite different regional models for an innovative and participatory formation of faith are not thinkable. For organizational and theological reasons it is also not unproblematic to make a programme of teaching

over many years the precondition for confirmation, as is happening in Zurich, not without parental resistance. What effects the obligatory character and the high investment commitment required will have on both financial and personal resources is currently the subject of a dissertation to be completed shortly.<sup>11</sup>

However, the objection repeatedly voiced against *rpg*, that it means a retreat at the same time into the niche of the church and so practices on Swiss territory nothing other than Christian doctrine in a new dress, scarcely holds up. For in view of the developments in educational policy that have been mentioned, a return by the churches on these terms to the field of the public school is neither conceivable nor foreseeable. To this extent this kind of creative *ultima ratio* of educationally oriented congregational development is more than suitable for the times.

In principle it must be stressed at the same time that the lasting potential of *rpg* in the sense of achieving religious and church socialization is as yet by no means clear. So in the future it will need to be more intensively studied what effects *rpg* is actually able to achieve for the children – similar conceptions which have already been longer established in other cantonal churches, such as what is called »Church Instruction« in Berne Canton, can here certainly be drawn into a comparative study.

## 5 CONCLUSION

At the same time smaller-scale studies and observations allow the following perspectives to be gained on *rpg* for church socialization and a home-making »development work« for other church contexts as well.

The particular profile of *rpg* shows itself unquestionably in the attempt in various ways not only to work intensively on the contents to be taught and learned (which the detailed references in the teaching materials impressively demonstrate!), but also to relate them to the personal and group spirituality of the children. Particularly through the connect-

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. R. VOIROL-STURZENEGGER, *Religiöse Bildung im Lebenslauf. Religionspädagogische Perspektiven zum Kompetenzerwerb im Kindesalter. Evaluationsstudie zum Religionspädagogischen Gesamtkonzept (rpg) der Evangelisch-reformierten Landeskirche des Kantons Zürich.*

ing of biblical texts and traditions, songs, personal reflection on Christian symbols and shared celebration, most children will certainly not see this time simply as school religious education in church but really take it as an improved form of individual religious experience. Through the multifarious methodical approaches to individual themes »with all the senses« and the opening of religious performances and symbolizations, *rpg* may be expected not only to contribute significantly to the formation of religious identity and personal belonging in protestant faith, but also to lasting positive effects in the children.

This is not to say that later confirmation classes can automatically connect up with *rpg* or that confirmation work – or those responsible for it – will necessarily have it easier than before. But one can at least suspect that young people who have gone through *rpg* up to confirmation, and experienced it in a positive way, will also go into the confirmation year with a greater sense that it is natural and with a fundamentally positive attitude – quite apart from the familiarity, when all goes well, with individual persons in the church congregation, the congregational life and the church building itself.

The repeated efforts in the teaching material to spell out the ethical implications of religious topics also make it apparent that *rpg* in no way envisages a church formation that is narrowly *intra muros*. Insofar as children become sensitized to their own responsibility, to empathy and diaconal assistance as well as personal guilt and forgiveness, an ethical dimension in *rpg* will become clearly recognizable and clearly reveal the public »external working« of protestant formation.

The intensity of the church's educational provision in *rpg* makes it obvious that this work can neither be carried primarily by the ministers alone nor only by engaged parents. *Rpg* assumes a wider taking on of responsibility by professionally trained and correspondingly paid catechists. This is not simply to be understood as relieving ministers of work because necessity compels it, but rather as representing a meaningful extension of professional participation within the church. To this extent *rpg* could in principle also make other cantonal churches and congregations aware of the greater, necessary and theologically consistent involvement of catechists in congregational life and liturgy as well as a stronger interlinking of different professional groups in the church.

The envisaged integration of parents, particularly in church services, has an effect in building up the congregation which can hardly be over-estimated. Because at many stages in the programme children are encouraged to communicate their creative approaches to themes to their parents as well, these become consciously involved in the religious development of their children and so challenged to reflect again more deeply on their own religious questions. Thus over and above all religious educational intentions *for the children or for each individual child*, *rpg* also represents a remarkable innovative experiment in protestant formation across the generations *in and with the entire congregation* which will be worth observing attentively elsewhere as well.