The Situation of Religious Education (RE) in Germany in 2013

This article deals with current developments in religious education (RE) in Germany. A special emphasis is on the issue what “confessional” means as a characteristic of RE in Germany. RE is guaranteed by the basic constitution as a subject in public schools organized in cooperation between the state and the religious communities. The state is generally responsible for schooling and the religious communities are responsible for the content of teaching and for acknowledgement of the RE teachers. Because of this situation RE is seen as a res mixta, a joint project of state authorities and religious communities. While the 16 Bundesländer have main authority for education the agreements for RE are made on this level between the religious communities and the respective Länder authorities.

The term “confessional” is often easily misunderstood, seen as old-fashioned, near to indoctrination (especially in British English) and not adequate for modern RE. The use of the word nurtures the stereotype that confessional RE has the aim to introduce pupils and student into a single faith tradition by a faith-based teacher with mono faith oriented material. This perception neglects that a “confessional” RE can mean very different approaches in different European contexts. Because of the fuzzy meaning of the term some speak about a denominational RE in Germany (cf. Schweitzer 2011) to express the situation that the churches are partners of the state for cooperation in RE.

It does not include the understanding that religious education should teach – let alone indoctrinate – children and adolescents into a certain denomination, religion or belief. It also does not presuppose that the students participating in a certain program actually belong to a certain denomination or religion. It simply means that the perspective, from which it is taught, is openly admitted and clearly defined. (Schweitzer, 2011: 117)

A multi layered subject

The painting of a picture of RE in a specific context is more complex than a monochrome world view can cover. A current publication about RE in Germany (Rothgangel & Schröder 2009) uses nine aspects as a structure for articles about the situation of Protestant RE in the 16 Bundesländer:

1. Developments in school policy of the Länder and in the regional churches
2. Observations of the practice of RE in the various types of schools
3. Remarks on the situation of Catholic RE – Hints to ecumenical cooperation
4. Information about alternative subjects such as Ethics, Philosophy, Islamic, Jewish and Christian Orthodox RE
5. Religion in school life
6. The role of Protestant or Catholic schools
7. Training of RE teachers
8. Regional peculiarities of RE concepts
9. Desiderata and challenges for theory of RE

This comprehensive list with the purpose to structure the articles about RE in the different Länder includes already basic information about the situation of RE in Germany: Differences exist in the 16 Bundesländer, there is increasing cooperation between Protestant and Catholic RE, there are different nuances of confessional RE, and there are alternative subjects (eg. Ethics, Values and
Norms, Practical Philosophy) for students who opt out from RE and choose a non-confessional alternative.

Some basic information: In Germany 60% of the population belongs either to the Roman-Catholic Church or the Protestant Church in Germany (cf. Rothgangel/Ziebertz, 2013). South and West of Germany are dominated by Catholics and the North is more Protestant dominated. About 1/3 of the population is without a confession not least in the East of Germany as a consequence of the anti-church policy of the former GDR regime. About 5% of the population is Muslims.

Concerning the legal situation of RE two main aspects are important. First the separation of state and religion and the religious freedom based on Art. 4 of the Basic Law. The separation in Germany follows not of a strict type such as in France but allows areas of cooperation such as RE in schools (res mixta). It is often called a ‘limping separation’. The principle of freedom of religion is fundamental for the right to opt out from confessional RE. The other aspect is that RE is the only subject guaranteed by the Basic Law. Art 7.3 states:

Religious education is an ordinary subject in public schools (...). Regardless of the regulatory law of the state, RE will be taught according to the principles of the religious communities.
No teacher can be obliged to teach RE against their will.

Why do religious communities have a say in RE? The experience of the Third Reich plays a role where the totalitarian system has misused school and subjects for cooptation according to the dominant state ideology. Therefore the state should not be exclusively responsible for any

The Basic Law provides a general frame for RE, nuances and different types of RE exist in different Bundesländer. The confessional/denominational approach is established in most of the Bundesländer but not in those countries where on 1st of January 1949 (date of validation of the Basic Law) a different regional legal situation existed. We have a non-confessional subject of Biblical History on a Christian basis in Bremen, a voluntary confessional RE in Berlin under responsibility of the religious communities and in Brandenburg the subject of LER: Life stances, Ethics, Religion is obligatory for all students.
In all other Länder RE is offered in general as Protestant and Catholic RE, increasingly also as Muslim RE (North Rhine-Westphalia, Bavaria, Lower Saxony, Hesse and models in other Länder) and in some regions also Jewish RE (Bavaria, Berlin, Baden-Wuertemberg, Hamburg, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland), Christian-Orthodox RE (Baden-Wuertemberg, Bavaria, Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia), and Buddhist RE (Berlin). At this point a differentiation is needed between Protestant and Catholic RE. Whereas the basis of Catholic RE is the three-part-homogeneity of Catholic teachers, Catholic students and Catholic content, the Protestant perspective is based on two-part homogeneity of a Protestant teacher and Protestant content. Protestant RE is open for all students independent from their religious of non-religious affiliation. A current development is the implementation of more dialogue oriented approaches with phases of collaboration between Catholic and Protestant RE. Beside the Länder specific regulations other issues came up and needed developments in didactics and pedagogy: models of interreligious learning, models of confessional cooperation and also religion in school life.

Practice in the classroom

The minimum number of students to organize RE differs between five and eight. In some contexts teaching is one hour per week but in general RE is taught two hours per week. RE is well accepted by
students, the numbers who opt out are small. Teachers have an academic university training of four years and need recognition of their religious community (Vocatio for Protestant RE and missio canonica for Catholic RE). In primary school often the class teacher teaches also RE, but can opt out. RE is seen as part of general education aiming at religious literacy, orientation in religion and religious competence with specific knowledge, attitudes, skills and motives to deal with one’s own religion but also the (different) religion of others. Main debates on RE are around its ‘outcome’ concerning competencies (Feindt et al.), its contribution to a ‘principled pluralism’ (Englert et al. 2012) and on more dialogue and cooperation among the different types of RE.

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References


