

Religious Education in Germany – Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The dilemma of religious education in Germany is that, on the one hand, the subject is excellently protected by the constitution, and on the other hand, conceptual and content-related changes appear inevitable due to societal transformation processes. Therefore, religious education requires justification both to society and to the church. Various perspectives must be considered for its future design: the objective for the children and young people learning it, the internal didactic structure of the subject, the global task of enabling students to deal with plurality, and questions regarding the organizational orientation of the subject.

Keywords

religious education; plurality; empowerment; positionality; values; culture; education; school system; identity; tradition; school environment; school pastoral care

1. The legal and social framework

Religious education in Germany is better protected by law than any other school subject, and yet the subject faces major social and conceptual challenges. Its value to society must be justified, as must the benefit that the churches have from being present in public schools. In addition, both the external conceptual form of the subject and the internal didactic design and objectives must be explained. After the experience with the National Socialist regime's desire to impose a binding world view on all citizens, the fathers and mothers of the German Basic Law designed a state that is committed to ideological neutrality. At the same time, it was clear that this state had to guarantee freedom of religion and also needed bearers of values in order to constitute a community of values. This applied to the public school system. Religious education was defined as a "res mixta", a mixed area, in which churches and other recognized religious communities are entitled and obliged to participate as public corporations (cf. Kropač 2021, 37f).

Article 7.3 of the Basic Law:

"Religious education is a regular subject in public schools, with the exception of non-denominational schools. Without prejudice to the state's right of supervision, religious education is taught in accordance with the principles of the religious communities. No teacher may be obliged to teach religious education against his or her will."

Religious education held a strong constitutional position before Germany's denominational composition significantly changed. Until the 1960s, the proportion of Christians was approximately 95% of society.

This is very different today. Earlier than expected the proportion of Catholic and Protestant Christians in Germany fell to the magical level of under 50% in 2023 (religious affiliation 2023). This was not caused by the increase in people with other religious affiliations (proportion of Muslims: 4%), but by people who do not belong to any religion. As a result, there is naturally also a shift in awareness for the importance of church, religion, and religious education. In other words, more than ever, it is necessary to openly justify the benefit a society has from a school subject that is dedicated to religious education.

2. The benefits of religious education for public schools and beyond

Since the Würzburg Synod, at which the important document "Religious Education in Schools" was published in 1974, religious education in public schools has had a consistently diaconal orientation. Religious education sees itself as a selfless service of the church at schools. It contributes to the formation of young people's identities and to the humanization of schools. As paradoxical as it may sound, religious education in public schools also benefits people who do not attend the subject (cf. Mendl 2018). This can be interpreted from various perspectives:

Religious studies: Religious education explores the culture on which societies and states in Europe are based. Anyone who wants to understand the origins of European culture, which was shaped by Christianity, also needs basic knowledge of religious objects, works of art, customs, rhythms of time and ways of thinking. The mode of encountering the world with religion helps the subject to understand the world and to discover culture. Understanding how "religion works" is the basis for dealing respectfully with people who think differently and believe differently in a global and pluralistic world. Other subjects like German, history, music, and art also benefit from the basic knowledge of religion that students acquire in religious education.

Religious communities: This argument may be surprising. A state also has the task of obliging religions to comply with its constitutional requirements because all religions – and Christianity is no exception – carry the seeds of fundamentalism within them. Public religious education in schools contributes to the civilization of religion. Religious education is more effective when it takes place in public schools rather than in private or informal settings.

The individual: There are situations in people's lives that cannot be dealt with intellectually. The Würzburg Synod already mentions such situations and makes clear reference to them. If the religious dimension were to be excluded from such situations and experiences, it would mean allowing the individual to wither away. For this reason, religious education is always designed to be correlative in its internal didactic structure. Questions of tradition are linked to

those of children and young people today. Religious education thus supports young people in finding their identity and coping with life.

School as a place of action: There are threshold points of school life: entering and leaving the respective type of school, the beginning and end of the school year, the beginning and end of the school week, and festivals of the year. The school system depends on someone knowing how to shape these periods of consolidation culturally and religiously. The services of school pastoral care and crisis intervention are particularly in demand if death strikes the school. The forms of religion outlined above contribute to the cultivation and humanization of the school environment; when incorporated into the school community in a reflective manner, they can become elements of school development and culture. Religion therefore humanizes the school as a place of action. These patterns of justification for the importance of religious education must be continually incorporated into the social discourse.

3. The benefits of religious education for the churches

The importance and scope of religious education for the churches can also be expressed in numbers: In 2023, 1.27 million people (6.2%) attended Catholic Sunday services in Germany (Church Statistics 2023). In contrast, the current figures show that 1.7 million students attended Catholic religious education in the 2023/24 school year (cf. Turulski 2024).

The Catholic bishops in Germany have now recognized how important religious education teachers are as the first “bridge builders” between today’s children and young people and the church (Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 2005, 34ff). After all, it can be assumed that the interfaces between the (age) cohorts who attend Sunday services and religious education are quite different. At the same time, critical questions are repeatedly raised about the success of religious education. These questions are based on expectations that no longer correspond to the current concept of religious education. As previously mentioned, contemporary religious education is characterized not by a catechetical, but by a distinctly diaconal orientation.

Building on this, religious education and school pastoral care constitute exemplary expressions of a concept of religious presence in the public sphere that is characterized by openness to plurality (cf. Mendl 2015). Religious education takes place within the context of societal plurality that is embedded in the public school system, whereas the congregational form of church often tends toward a form of self-enclosure or ghettoization. Since the Würzburg Synod, religious education has been confronted with an internal plurality that includes believing students and those who are non-believing, searching, undecided, or indifferent. This capacity for differentiation may well represent one of the most significant prospects for the future of religious education in Germany. The Christian faith must be made plausible to this pluralistic student body. Contrary to the attempts in all dioceses to keep the basic clerical structure of the church alive in a makeshift manner by creating large pastoral areas, religious education is predominantly and almost exclusively the responsibility of laypeople, state and church

religious teachers. Religious education as a school subject in schools must necessarily be adaptable institutionally and conceptually because it has to comply with the rules and the respective educational theoretical guidelines of the state. What happens in schools in terms of religion must be aligned with the temporal rhythms of the secular. This is carried out by many volunteers, especially in the field of school pastoral care. In many of these aspects, the way in which religious education deals with social plurality could be a blueprint for the church as a whole.

4. The future of religious education – four perspectives

At the same time, the question of the internal and external development of the subject also arises. The anthropological starting point, the internal structure, global objectives, and the organizational structure of religious education in the future are four perspectives.

4.1 Anthropological framework: Christian empowerment

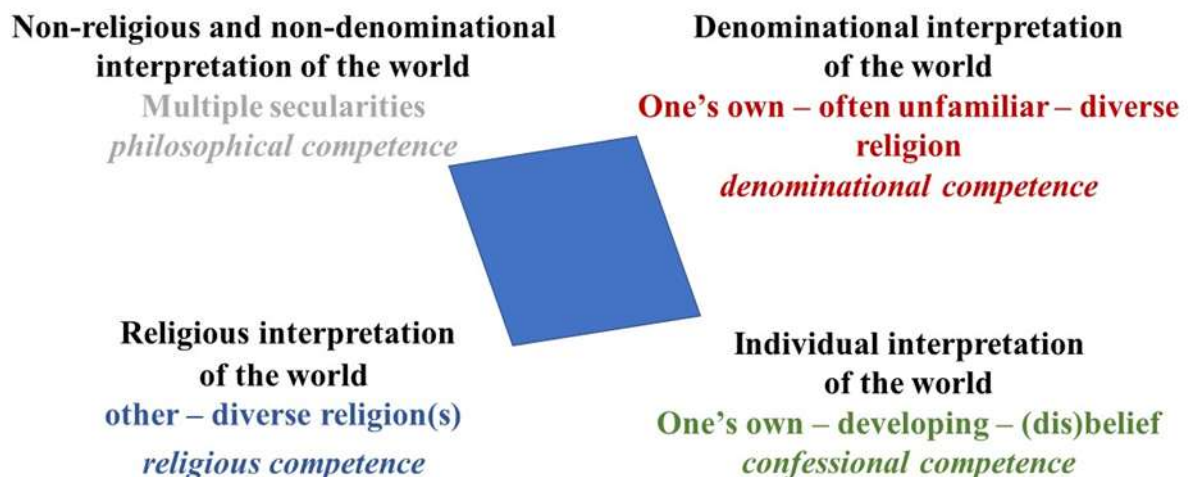
Even before all content-related educational goals, children and young people who attend the subject should go into life strengthened by the Good News. A “Christian empowerment” aims to expand the possibility of determining one’s own life and should also be the guiding metaphor for the direction of the professional actions of teachers (Domsgen 2019, 343–352, see also Bucher 2024). Appropriate teaching always strives to enable and empower the learners and promotes their ability to participate and show solidarity. On a systemic level, empowerment raises awareness of the connection between education and cultural, social and economic structures. Understood in this way, Christian empowerment always promotes resilience and corresponds to the concept of enabling (Nothaft 2012).

4.2 Inner structure: Performative elements in religious education

In view of the break with tradition, it is no longer enough to just talk about religion. The ability to interpret religion (“interpretation competence”) must be intertwined with the possibility of participating in religion (“participation competence”). This is the only way to create an experience-oriented basis for understanding religious practice. Against the background of a responsibly designed concept of performative religious education, religious education can invite students not only to understand taught religion, but also to experience the resonances of a lived religion in its life-enhancing facets in order to gain a taste and sense for the infinite (Schleiermacher) (Leonhard, Hanusa 2021; Mendl 2022, 2024). In this respect, religious education has the task of “offering the perspective of faith” (Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 2022). Teaching is successful “When there is a spark in the classroom” because a relationship to the world develops in which the participants feel touched and moved and can experience themselves as self-effective (Rosa, Endres 2022). As Ignatius of Loyola aptly expressed it, “It is not the wealth of knowledge that satiates the soul and gives it satisfaction, but rather the feeling and tasting of things from within” (Ignatius of Loyola 1956, 7).

4.3 Global objective: The ability to deal with plurality

Religious education is intended to prepare children and young people to deal with plurality. In addition to incorporating religious interpretations of the world, there is a growing recognition of the perspectives of those identified as non-religious. The central concern is to engage respectfully with diverse truth claims, each of which must be critically examined in terms of its argumentative coherence and practical implications. The difference between the interpretation of the world implied by the denominationally bound subject and the different individual perspectives of the students must be regarded as a reality. Adolescent Catholic students are also characterized by a not-yet-given consent to religion, faith, and church. They will make their own individual decisions. In a global world, other religious interpretations of the world must also be included for students to acquire comprehensive religious competence. Finally, considering the demographic trends outlined at the beginning of this essay, it appears essential to engage with secular constructions of meaning as well. Even those categorized as religiously unaffiliated articulate existential orientations and frameworks of meaning that warrant respectful consideration (Jürgens 2021; Löffeld 2024).



A nuanced understanding of the role of positionality among those engaged in religious education is essential. For example, the Koblenz Consensus, was formulated and endorsed by German Protestant and Catholic religious education scholars in 2024:

Religious education teachers must make transparent recognizable religious and theological viewpoints (*transparency requirement*). Dealing with plurality means that competing patterns of interpretation must be presented and dealt with respectfully (*controversy requirement*). Dealing with the learners must be characterized by respectful communication (*respect requirement, prohibition of overwhelming*). The aim of such religious education is for children and young people to develop the ability to judge and act in matters of religion (*orientation requirement*).

4.4. Organizational structure: Religious education for everyone?

Finally, there is the central question of the future form of religious education. As mentioned above, religious education appears to be guaranteed under the constitution. However, limiting it to this status is neither socially nor conceptually sufficient. If the objective is to provide the widest possible access to religious education for all students, a mere adherence to the status quo proves inadequate. Moreover, the ongoing process of secularization is accompanied by growing organizational challenges at the local level. In regions where either the Catholic or Protestant Church exists in a diaspora context, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ensure the provision of religious education with a sufficient number of participants. For this reason, there are conceptual models that go beyond denominational religious education which can also be discussed accordingly (cf. Riegel 2018).

Denominational religious education: The homogeneity of narrowly understood religious education (for example, Catholic students in Catholic religious education) enables access to religion from a participant perspective (“from religion”), but is also a problem because learning as a classroom unit is usually not possible from an organizational perspective. The question arises as to whether the outlined goal of plurality can be achieved in this concept. Furthermore, is it enough to only consider the group of one’s own denomination when it comes to religious education?

Ethics – Values – Religion: The other extreme would be the abandonment of explicit religious education and the establishment of a general subject of Ethics – Values – Religion. Experience with the integrated subject “Life Studies – Ethics – Religious Studies” (LER) in Brandenburg has shown, however, that there is a very real danger that religious education will be marginalized.

Religious studies lessons: Even with this model of teaching with a pluralistic student body and teaching from a bird’s eye view, there is a risk that the inner side of religion and religions will not be sufficiently emphasized or that only the problematic and functional aspects of religion will be addressed. There is also the question of whether religious studies, ethics, and philosophy would replace theology as the appropriate leading discipline.

Denominational-cooperative religious education: Model projects for denominational-cooperative religious education are currently being carried out in all federal states in Germany. The aim is not only to overcome the organizational problems outlined above in diaspora areas, but also to take cautious steps to reposition the subject ecumenically. The bishops also support these projects, provided certain framework conditions are met (Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 2016). Non-Christian students can also attend these lessons. According to many religious educators, this model is at least 40 years too late.

Religious education for all: In the federal state of Lower Saxony, the subject “Christian religious education for all” will be introduced from the coming school year 2025/2026 onward (Heinig et al. 2024). The two churches are responsible for a joint school subject aimed at non-Christian students. The school subject is by no means intended to be just a denominational study that also includes the other denomination. At its core, the school subject should be geared towards the students’ questions. It should be about critically examining topics such as truth, meaning and orientation. The “Christian religion according to Protestant and Catholic principles” should then also be included in the arguments. The appeal of this model could be the later inclusion of other religious communities in order to develop an overarching model capable of plurality.

Conclusion: The goal: Religious education for as many students as possible

The fact that religious education in Germany is not as bad as is often assumed is illustrated by the dropout rates, which are overall quite unspectacular. The number of students who voluntarily attend the subject already exceeds the number who opt out. If we could succeed in attracting many more students to the subject, this would be an important step toward providing as many students as possible with religious education. Broad-based religious education appears indispensable, especially in a society that is becoming increasingly pluralistic and secular. Anyone who wants to understand the world must also include the various forms of religious interpretation alongside ideologically neutral and secular ones. The saying still holds true that there can be no world peace without religious peace.

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