READY for the future?

Consequences on religious education in public schools

Workshop at the Representation of the State of Baden-Württemberg to the European Union in Brussels
May 15th, 2018

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Prof. Dr. Peter Kliemann / Staatliches Seminar für Didaktik und Lehrerbildung (Gymnasien) Tübingen
kliemann@semgym.uni-tuebingen.de

www.readyproject.eu
http://seminar-tuebingen.de/Lde/Startseite/Projekte/READY+neu

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Othering is the process of casting a group, an individual or an object into the role of ‘not one of us’ to establish one’s own identity, neglecting that every person is a complex bundle of emotions, ideas, motivations, reflexes, priorities, and many other subtle aspects. Whether the ‘Other’ is a racial or a religious group, a gender group, a sexual minority or a nation, this process denies the ‘Other’ the defining characteristics of the ‘Same’. According to Michel Foucault, othering is strongly connected with power and knowledge. When we ‘other’ another group, we point out their perceived weaknesses to make ourselves look stronger or better. It implies a hierarchy, and it serves to keep power where it already lies.

The practice of ‘Othering’ may lead to the exclusion of persons who do not fit the norm of the social group, which is a version of the Self. In an educational context, we must be aware of the basic consideration: Who is ‘We’ and who is the ‘Other’ within a school, classroom or community? In other words: Who represents the ‘norm’, ‘status quo’?

If education is to help people dance with difference, we need faith communities and schools where people meet difference. We need communities and schools, where people of different cultures, beliefs and values can meet and learn to dance, however awkwardly or angrily they begin. We also need teachers and administrators who value the dance, who have some experience in negotiating difference, and who are willing to be learners in the process. In such a dance, no one has all the answers; if they did, the dance would cease and education would become stylised and rigid.


Interesting discussions during a study visit to Aberdeen: I notice the temptation to process the huge amount of impressions by categories as “we” and “they”. In a way these kinds of comparisons might be inevitable and for psychological reasons even necessary and I also discover myself again and again joining this game. Generalization will however become dangerous and obstruct insights, whenever we connect observations and valuing too quickly, especially when we try to explain complex settings by monocausal arguments. Thinking more thoroughly about it, we all know that the few days of a study visit just showed us isolated, somehow coincidental examples of Scottish Religious Education. And we all know that the teaching reality in Germany is also very diverse, complex, contradictory and above all not always delightful. A good counterbalance to othering I found the intensive, inquiring and ruminative talks we had with our Scottish colleagues about concrete classroom situations. Over and over again I was surprised, also in the wider context of the entire READY project, how quickly experienced colleagues from different European countries, with very different concepts of Religious Education and very diverse forms of teacher education, would agree on what is didactically desirable and what not. Is there beyond all theories and concepts something like a deep structure, some kind of common grammar of teaching RE, which might help us all to see regional debates and controversies in a new and also more relaxed perspective?

The problem of othering, talking about “us” and the “them”. Who are the others, who belongs to “us”? Back home in Tübingen, in the upper secondary RE course I am teaching. A student delivers an interesting and inspiring presentation about concepts of God in “Hinduism”. She often says: “in our religion”, “in our culture”, “bei uns”. She involves her class mates, a very critical group with quite a number of students who wouldn’t even call themselves “Christians” or “believers”, in a vivid discussion and almost everybody starts referring to “us” and “them”. I decide to prepare a lesson for next week on “Who are we?”, using the “tartans” the colleagues from Aberdeen brought in.
Discussion group 2: “Neutrality“ vs “Impartiality“

We, roughly 40 students of the protestant theology faculty of the University of Tuebingen, are attending a course on “Religion and Worldviews - New challenges for Religious Education“ conducted by Professor Friedrich Schweitzer and Professor Peter Kliemann this semester.

Last session, we took a closer look at the new thesis by Karin Kittelmann Flensner, who some of you might actually know: “Religious Education in Contemporary Pluralistic Sweden“  

In the course of our discussion, we came across some interesting observations that we would like to share with you.

At first, the idea of approaching religious issues and issues on different worldviews from a neutral perspective seemed very appealing to us. Yet, our doubts about the practicability of this neutral approach got bigger and bigger the longer and more intense we dealt with the results of Ms. Kittelmann Flensner’s work. To illustrate what we mean by that, we would like to take a visual image at hand.

Let's imagine we all find ourselves in an “ocean of worldviews“. Therefore, the main goal of Religious Education should probably be to protect the “newcomers in the water“ from drowning. There are various different ways to achieve this goal:

First of all, there is the plain possibility to push the unexperienced non-swimmers into the water and tell them: “Watch out and be careful not to drown!“ In this case, the pupils would be free to choose their own stroke. The “newcomer“ might be able to learn how to swim by watching the other swimmers in the ocean. In doing so, they are free to move as pleased.

We felt that this type of swimming practice can be compared to the concept of neutrality in religious schooling. In this case, “I am neutral“ would mean that “I am trying to make it on my own in the ocean of worldviews.“ “I am neutral“ would also mean that “I am alone in trying to keep my head over water without being constantly overrun by the challenges of my pluralistic environment.“ “I am neutral“ would meant that “I am forced to try to swim, but I am responsible for learning to swim on my own by looking at how the others swim.“

There was one intruding question for us related to this context: Is it even possible to have something like a “neutral“ conveying of religious world views? Or don’t we have to assume that a “neutral“ point of view also has a certain stance and thus cannot satisfy the claim of being “neutral“?

Let’s come back to the image of “the ocean of worldviews“: Another way of keeping “the new swimmers“ from drowning is to provide a teacher in support of showing them the different ways of swimming. This
solution could be compared to the confessionally affiliated Religious Education. Each and every way of swimming, whether breaststroke, front crawl, dolphin stroke or butterfly stroke, could be linked to one confessional tie of Religious Education. Depending on the denomination, the stroke differs but the goal remains the same: Keeping your head above water and avoiding to drown.

Maybe it is due to the fact that we lean towards confessionally affiliated Religious Education, but we found it really helpful to have a clear program with our label of the “Protestant Religious Education”. One can use this program to work with. One can come to grips with this in a constructive and critical way and may come to a completely different result. This way of approaching Religious Education seemed to most of us more honest, more understandable and more accessible.

Obviously, there are various different ways to swim in the “ocean of worldviews”. However, in our opinion there are unanswered question we would like to ask you: How is it possible for Religious Education not to cease at the precept of neutrality; how is it possible not to abandon the pupils while they are learning to swim, but to contribute to the pupil’s examination of religious issues, to help them finding their own answers and to encourage the development of tolerant beliefs?

We really would appreciate to get in contact with you concerning these questions. Our Semester is nearly over and after the semester break we all will attend different seminars. Yet, those of us who are really interested could easily keep contact via digital platforms and structures such as the Ready-Project outside of the usual seminar at University.

Please send your answer to our Professor, Mr. Kliemann. He will then pass it on to us. We are looking forward to hearing from you.
Dear Students at Tübingen,

Thank you for the questions you raised. They were thought provoking.

We, who are replying to your letters, are six students studying “Science of Religion” at Karlstad university, and a member of faculty from the same subject.

Since the subject RE in Swedish schools is non-confessional, you gave us food for thought regarding the very foundation of the subject. The question that you address; “how is it possible for RE not to cease at the precept of neutrality” concerns the core of how one views the school subject. More specifically; the purpose of it. If we start off by taking this into account, it might be a beginning of an answer.

Up until the early 20th century, Religion was one of the central school subjects in Sweden. (Indeed, one could argue that it was the very first of Swedish school subjects.) In 1919, the school subject became independent of the (then) State Church, but the content was still firmly teaching in Christianity. The big change came in the curriculum of 1962, when the topic was no longer specifically Christianity, but religion in general. However, it was unclear what the purpose of the subject really was to be. The answer that emerged, was “life questions”, together with ethics and knowledge about the world religions (defined as Judaism; Christianity; Islam; Hinduism; and Buddhism).

When it comes to RE in our context, it should give the students the opportunities to develop: the ability to analyse religions and outlooks on life based on different interpretations and perspectives, knowledge of human identity in relation to religions and outlooks on life, knowledge of different views on the relationships between religion and science, and the ability to analyse these, the ability to use ethical concepts, theories and models and the ability to examine and analyse ethical issues in relation to Christianity, other religions and outlooks on life. This means that the aim of RE says that the “Teaching should take as its starting point a view of society characterised by openness regarding lifestyle, outlooks on life, differences between people, and also give students the opportunity to develop a preparedness for understanding and living in a society characterised by diversity.” (Skolverket, 2011.)

As the curriculum states we have to teach from an objective point of view. To answer your question about neutrality we have to look at the fundamentals of being human. Is it possible for a human being to be neutral? We believe that humans will always be somewhat subjective, if not with words, then with body language or facial expressions. So the simple answer to your question might be no, there is no such thing as being “neutral”. The Swedish school and society does have Christian values and we are expected to incorporate those in our education. Keeping this in mind our education is not strictly neutral. Though the claim that the pupils will “drown” if not shown the ways of the various religions is something we have different feelings about. Even though we might not be completely objective or neutral in our education we give pupils tools to make their own choices. We teach students about various religions and life views to give them a pallet to choose from or make of what they want. It is more about giving the pupils the freedom to believe what they want. Our job is to give them...
the knowledge of other religions and life views, so that they would not, in your words, drown. Furthermore, this is also seen in the academic disciplines which calls for a scientific approach. The question about neutrality can also be a philosophical one. One could argue that any content is based on selection, which includes the academic traditions. In the field of sociology of knowledge this is put in some light. However, one attempt to ensure neutrality is to show many perspectives put from many different positions.

Dr. David Smith, Aberdeen University / Scotland

I think, coming from the Scottish context, where neutrality is something which is highly prized. And it is something which is instilled in students, which was instilled in me a few years ago, when I was a student: In the classroom you remain neutral. You don’t take a position. You hold back, you almost have your students in a guessing position. And the idea is that you don’t reveal of yourself, what your own position might be on something. And you fear somehow for somehow contaminating or swaying their thinking. And I think through the project … I think that is something that I have personally thought about a lot and I have probably come to the conclusion that actually neutrality is neither desirable nor achievable. I think in some senses … you can have maybe degrees of … for example you can go indoctrinating if you want to put it in those terms. But the whole thing is actually more of a spectrum. And I am not sure, if you take a relation or perspective on teaching it is a particularly desirable thing to conceal so much about yourself in something which is such a human, explorative type of field. So I think there is something quite fundamental about religion and how it relates to what it means to be human that links into a pedagogy and how we teach it. The other aspect I was thinking about is actually neutrality can mask more hidden ideology. Maybe we can sometimes carelessly or mindlessly assert neutrality when it is anything other than neutrality. And therefore I guess through the project I have been mulling over and it has become clear in my mind of the undesirability of neutrality, in particular in terms of a pedagogical approach but also actually in terms of the way it may mask other ideas which we might have. So I think it is much better to be upfront and more self-reflective than to claim a neutral approach.

A distinction is made here between “impartiality” and “neutrality”. The principle of impartiality involves organising teaching and learning without discrimination as to ethnicity, religion, class or political opinions, with freedom of expression allowed within agreed limits. [...] Neutrality, however, requires concealment of any personal commitment on the teacher’s part, and any personal views of pupils are set to one side. [...] Experience and research indicate that pupils appreciate openness in response to questions and that teachers should answer questions about their own personal faith honestly and at a level appropriate to the age and aptitude of the pupils concerned.

The image of “safe space” for civil and well-ordered classroom interaction when discussing controversial issues such as religions has been considered. Insights from research on the study of religions in schools, especially recording young people’s views and classroom interactions, have been reviewed. The general conclusion is that there are suitable methods and procedures for making classrooms safer spaces, but all classroom interaction involves some degree of risk, especially when controversial issues are discussed and different claims to truth are made. This can be minimized by increasing teachers’ awareness of power relations within classes, their knowledge of the backgrounds of students and their awareness of relevant research findings. Moreover, there is evidence that young people’s confidence and ability to participate competently in classroom dialogue improves with practice. Regarding freedom of expression, the view is taken that controversial issues should be covered, but that all views expressed should be sensitive to the plurality of viewpoints within the school, to minority groups represented in the school and to the principles of democracy and human rights. (P. 57)
In educational institutions, ‘safe space’ originally indicated that a teacher, educational institution or pupil body does not tolerate violence, harassment or hate speech, thereby creating a safe place for all pupils in a group or classroom. The term has been extended to refer to a space for individuals to come together to explore differences and to communicate their experiences with being different in biological sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, cultural background, religious affiliation, age, or physical or mental ability (cf. Council of Europe 2006). Critics, however, rightly point out that safe spaces have their place only in the enhancement of free speech and the guarantee that people of all identities are entitled to a tolerant environment to express who they are, not in the exclusion of other opinions and positions.

Critics rightly point out, however, that this debate cannot and should not take place to the exclusion of other opinions and positions, since classrooms would otherwise run the risk of becoming echo chambers, in which one is only surrounded by the same people and opinions. Therefore, we must discuss whether school subjects such as RE or Ethics can, should or even have to be, such places. And if so, what conditions must be met?
As part of the READY project various ways of handling increasing diversity in the RE classroom are discussed by the project team. In this context Heinz Ivkovits (KPH Vienna/Krems) raised the question ‘RE as a safe or brave space?’

In the current tough and sometimes frightening public discourse, many people feel misunderstood and left alone in terms of opinions and beliefs. They seek allies who share their views and the "We" increasingly retreat into safe bubbles. Conflicting positions that could injure or irritate are excluded. Those who think or act differently are preventively packed into an imaginary box called "The Others".

But who is "We" and the "Others", e. g. within a school, a classroom or a community? Who represents the "norm", the "status quo"? What does this mean for learning and teaching?

The Council of Europe suggests the “provision of a safe learning space to encourage expression without fear of being judged or held to ridicule”. Should RE or Ethics be such ‘safe spaces’ for the exploration of diversity to show sensitivity to the belief and values positions of the individual students?

Whenever controversial issues are discussed and different truth claims are made, students need to understand that the principle of freedom of religion or belief gives individuals the right to hold a particular belief, even if others do not share it. This requires the recognition of “internal diversity” and the personal character of religions and non-religious world views. Discussing differences at eye level and in mutual respect makes us aware that knowledge is generated only by open and free exchange of opinions, views and positions, even if they are uncomfortable and unpleasant.

Thus, encounters and discourses in educational institutions (and probably in RE classrooms) need a mixture of rooms: safe spaces in which one can ‘arrive’ in the circle of like-minded people, ask questions and receive answers. And open (‘brave’) spaces in which authentically introduced perspectives are clarified and classified. Where everyone has the freedom to think differently, to adopt different positions, but also to live up to the claim to endure ambivalences and inadequacies against the pressure of uniformity and unambiguousness.
We argue that bad - violent - religion is not false religion, in spite of such representation by Religious Education (RE) teachers.

On 10th September 2014, President Obama stated: "ISIL is not ‘Islamic,’ No religion condones the killing of innocents." (https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1). In this statement, Obama sanitised religion (in this instance, Islam) - sealing it off from murderous contamination. This same well intentioned - yet mistaken - definitional turn is seen in wider contemporary cultural discourse in which ‘true’ religion, being essentially loving and peaceful, is distinguished from ‘false’ religion, which constitutes a harmful and dangerous distortion.

In UK schools, our mixed-method, national dataset (survey and semi-structured interviews) shows that some RE teachers similarly sanitise religion of wrongdoing. Furthermore, representations of religion in textbooks, examination papers, and curriculum support material compounds this benign, essentialist, conceptualisation of religion - be it Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc.

This bad-religion-is-false-religion discourse is unsurprising for two reasons: the first, we argue, is political; the second, philosophical. Many RE teachers are concerned to counter media representations connecting Islam with violence. Second, a presentation of religion as a monovalent, homogenous, essentialist concept is commonplace. Such an understanding erroneously misrepresents and distorts complex social realities (Religions) - rendering it impossible for Buddhism, for example, to be enacted as both peaceful and violent. In an apologetic turn, the latter is deemed a ‘false’ representation.

To be religiously literate is to understand the complexities of religion - to appreciate that ISIL is an expression of Islam; that violent Christian anti-abortionist direct-action is an expression of Christianity; and that Buddhist monks physically attacking Muslims in Myanmar is an expression of Buddhism. Although not ‘false’ expressions, they do represent bad forms of religion (as opposed to bad religions).

The counterbalance is also valid: Muslim Aid, giving out food and clothing to people in need is an expression of Islam. Similar acts of charity apply to Christianity and Buddhism.

Whilst we can reasonably distinguish between: desirable and undesirable religion; non-harmful and harmful; or even good and bad expressions of religion - it is flawed to present these distinctions as synonymous with ‘true’ and ‘false’ religion.

RE can only enable and encourage religious literacy if religion and religions are presented as multifarious, complex, social phenomena. This cannot be predicated upon a conceptualisation of harmful religion as ‘false’ religion, which is inimical to a deep understanding of religion in our world today - as in times past.
Das Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg lädt Sie herzlich ein zur

Werkstatttagung „Religious Diversity in European Societies and its Consequences on the Relations of State and Religious Communities, e.g. in Public Schools“

Dienstag, 15. Mai 2018, von 9:00 Uhr bis 17:00 Uhr

in der Vertretung des Landes Baden-Württemberg bei der Europäischen Union
Rue Belliard 60-62, 1040 Brüssel.


Unter diesen Bedingungen gemeinsame europäische Strategien für die Bewältigung komplexer Aufgaben zu finden, ist schwierig, der Bedarf an Austausch und Verständigung aber groß.

Programm der Werkstatttagung

9.00 Uhr
Konvergenztendenzen in den europäischen Religionsverfassungssystemen
Impulsgeber: Prof. Dr. Gerhard Robbers, Minister a.D.
Moderator: Stephen Gerhard Stehli, Ministerium für Bildung des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt
In englischer Sprache.

10.45 Uhr
Islam in der Krise - Was wird aus der Kooperation mit islamischen Verbänden?
Impulsgeber: Dr. Michael Blume, Staatsministerium Baden-Württemberg, Beauftragter des Landes gegen Antisemitismus
Moderator: Dr. Silvan Eppinger, Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg, Stabsstelle Religionsangelegenheiten/Staatskirchenrecht
In englischer Sprache.
12.00 Uhr

**Mittagsgespräch „Wachsende religiöse Vielfalt - was sind die Antworten Europas?**

Fachöffentliche Podiumsdiskussion in deutscher Sprache mit Simultanübersetzung ins Englische


Podiumsdiskussion mit:
Vincent Depaigne, Koordinator für den Dialog mit Kirchen, Religions- und Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften, Europäische Kommission, Brüssel
Katharina Jestaedt, Stellvertretende Leiterin des Kommissariats der deutschen Bischöfe, Berlin
Prof. Dr. Gerhard Robbers, Minister a.D., Trier
Dr. Michael Blume, Staatsministerium Baden-Württemberg, Beauftragter des Landes gegen Antisemitismus

Moderation: Prof. Dr. Michael C. Hermann, Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg, Stabsstelle Religionsangelegenheiten/Staatskirchenrecht

Ab 13.30 Uhr wird ein Imbiss gereicht.

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**Teil 2 der Werkstatttagung (Fortsetzung):**

14.30 Uhr

„**Ready for the future**: Auswirkungen auf den Religionsunterricht an öffentlichen Schulen“ Impulsgeber: Prof. Dr. Peter Kliemann, Staatl. Seminar für Didaktik und Lehrerbildung Tübingen
Moderation: Mirijam Wiedemann, Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg, Stabsstelle Religionsangelegenheiten/Staatskirchenrecht

16.00 Uhr

**Abschlusspanel**

Ende: ca. 17.00 Uhr

Bitte melden Sie sich für die Teilnahme an der Werkstatttagung an bis 27.4.2018 unter cordula.scharte@km.kv.bwl.de

Die Veranstaltung wird durch die Robert Bosch Stiftung gefördert.
The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports Baden-Württemberg is glad to invite you to the

Conference „Religious Diversity in European Societies and its Consequences on the Relations of State and Religious Communities, e.g. in Public Schools“

Tuesday, 15th May 2018 from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

at the Representation of the State of Baden-Württemberg to the EU
Rue Belliard 60-62, 1040 Brussels.

Religion and matters of religious belonging and religious extremism have returned to the social discourse and the political agenda in European states in recent years. What holds societies together in times of growing religious and ideological plurality and spreading abuse of religion to legitimize violence and terror? This question is prevalent in societies all over Europe and is subject to academic and political debate. It is necessary to discuss how state and society can and must adapt to a transforming religious landscape.

The situation in the states of the European Union could not be more heterogeneous. The relations between state and churches and other religious groups have evolved in unique ways as a result of specific historic conditions and processes of migration. In addition in federal systems like Germany different forms and cultures of relations between state and church have evolved even on the state level.

Finding common European strategies for tackling complex tasks under these circumstances is challenging, yet there is a crucial need for exchange and understanding

Event program

9:00 a.m.
Convergence tendencies in the European religious constitutional systems
Initiator: Prof. Dr. Gerhard Robbers, former Minister
Moderator: Stephen Gerhard Stehli, Ministry of Education of Sachsen-Anhalt

10:45 a.m.
Islam in crisis - What about cooperation with Muslim communities?
Initiator: Dr. Michael Blume, State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg, Commissioner of the state of Baden-Württemberg against anti-Semitism
Moderator: Dr. Silvan Eppinger, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports Baden-Württemberg, Department of Religious Affairs
Lunch Debate “Growing religious diversity - What are Europe's answers?”

Public panel discussion in German language with simultaneous translation into English

An ongoing transformation of the religious landscape can be observed in many European countries. The panel will take the changes in the sociology of the religious field as a starting point to discuss the consequences on the relations between state and religious groups with respect to politics as well as constitutional law. One particular and widely discussed example in this respect is the question of religious education in public schools. Similarities and differences in the approaches and future scenarios in different European countries will be accentuated.

Panel discussion with:
Vincent Depaigne, Coordinator of the Dialogue with Churches, Religious and Philosophical and Non-confessional Organizations, European Commission, Brussels
Katharina Jestaedt, Deputy Head of the Commission of the German Bishops, Berlin
Prof. Dr. Gerhard Robbers, former Minister, Trier
Dr. Michael Blume, State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg, Commissioner of the state of Baden-Württemberg against anti-Semitism

Moderator: Prof. Dr. Michael C. Hermann, Ministry of Education, Youth, Sports Baden-Württemberg, Department of Religious Affairs

Light lunch from 1:30 p.m.

Part 2 of the Conference (continuance)

2:30 p.m.
**Ready for the future? Consequences on religious education in public schools**
Initiator: Prof. Dr. Peter Kliemann, State Institute for initial teacher training, Tübingen
Moderator: Mirijam Wiedemann, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports Baden-Württemberg, Department of Religious Affairs

4:00 p.m.
**Concluding Debate**

End of event: 5:00 p.m.

For participation in the workshop conference please register until 27th of April 2018 under cordula.scharte@km.kv.bwl.de

The event is supported by the Robert Bosch Foundation.