



POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF RELIGION- RELATED DIALOGUE IN SCHOOLS IN EUROPE

Edited by
Wolfram Weisse



Possibilities and Limitations of Religion-Related Dialogue in Schools in Europe

Preparing pupils to engage with religious and cultural heterogeneity is increasingly seen as a key task for school education. This book presents research on religion-related dialogue in European schools and addresses the complex intersection of various factors supporting or hindering it.

This volume offers findings of the international research project 'Religion and Dialogue in modern societies' (ReDi). The chapters present analyses of school case studies in five European cities, London (England), Hamburg and Duisburg (Germany), Stockholm (Sweden), and Stavanger (Norway), to empirically answer the question: *What are possibilities and limitations of religion-related dialogue in schools?*

Possibilities and Limitations of Religion-Related Dialogue in Schools in Europe will be a key resource for practitioners and researchers of religious education, education studies, educational research, religious studies, and sociology. It was originally published as a special issue of the *Religion & Education*.

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Introduction—The European Research Project ReDi: An Overview of Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies

Wolfram Weisse

ABSTRACT

This article gives an overview of the Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies (ReDi) project. The article sketches the main questions of the research, its interdisciplinary composition, the metropolitan areas in Europe involved, the different levels of research and some of the main results. The overall research approach of ReDi is explained, and the focus is directed to particular elements of ReDi such as dialogical theology and urban interreligious practice. This could serve as background for the educational research, which will not be dealt with in the present article, as it forms the focus of the other articles presented in this special issue of *Religion & Education*.

New interest in religion and interreligious dialog

Religions, religious education (RE), and interreligious dialog have gained importance during the last 15 or so years. This has been especially the case in Western Europe, where—after a long period of disinterest—this thematic area has become more and more debated. This even concerns France, with its long tradition of the strong principle of *laïcité*. Nevertheless, an intense discussion has started in France on how to cope with religious themes in the public arena, including schools. The new line of argument is backed by demands for an “intelligent *laïcité*” (Régis Debray), which provides space to deal with religion in public schools. Therefore, even in France, there is a new tendency: Religion is coming back “dans la sphère publique” (Jean-Paul Willaime).¹

Thus, the assumption that religions would be weakened by secularization, even to the point of disappearing altogether, has turned out to be wrong. However, religious pluralization has not counteracted ongoing secularization but has contributed to the emergence of new discourses and constellations of actors in different fields, including RE.

The growing interest in religion and its relevance for intercultural and interreligious understanding (and its potential of destruction), forms the

background for the growing efforts of international organizations, such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe.²

Moreover, an increasing number of stakeholders from the public arena are discovering the field of religion as a socially relevant area. Thus, a new department for "Religions and Peace" was established in the Foreign Office in Berlin in 2016, dealing with the significance of religion for the peace process in the international sphere.

With regards to the university sector, it should be noted that the scientific discussions around the topic of religion—dialog—society have increased considerably during the past 20 years, both within the humanities and the social sciences.³ Religious topics are not only taken up by "insider" disciplines such as theology or religious pedagogy but increasingly also by other disciplines including political science, philosophy, and sociology. A good example is the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who, in his earlier thinking, ignored the role of religion. From 2001 onward, he showed a strong and growing interest in the role of religion in public life and published extensively on this theme. In one of his analyses, he described inter-religious tolerance as a "pacemaker for a correctly understood multiculturalism and the equitable coexistence of different cultural lifestyles."⁴

The current developments reflect a situation in which our theoretical framework for religion, education, pluralization, dialog, and secularization has to be rebuilt and related to empirical research. In the field of RE there are already considerable efforts being made in this direction, for example, within the framework of huge European research projects such as REDCo.⁵ Moreover, the findings of such research have been disseminated to a broad international readership through the initiative of Robert Jackson, especially through his involvement in the Council of Europe and its publications, including *Signposts*.⁶ Thus, developing an analytical perspective on the relations between people with different religious and secular positions, in the context of growing diversity in modern societies, is a vital task for academia and society at large.

This is also the contribution of the Academy of World Religions of Hamburg University, where the center of the European research project Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies (ReDi) is located. The approach of the Academy of World Religions is deliberately dialog-oriented, focusing not only on a coexistence of different religions, but on the interaction between them, especially with a view to extant dialog orientation and the future potential for interreligious dialog. The Academy of World Religions includes Christianity, Islam, Judaism,⁷ Buddhism,⁸ Hinduism,⁹ and Alevism,¹⁰ while also taking into account secular positions, especially the perspectives of religiously unaffiliated persons and institutions.¹¹ This basic

approach of the Academy of World Religions is a highly appropriate setting for the ReDi project, addressing the fundamental questions of interreligious dialog both with regards to its possibilities and limitations. Its interdisciplinary approach, combining theology, the social sciences, and education, has been chosen to study the complex phenomena of interreligious dialog, including the impact on social processes of integration and peacemaking.¹² I will return to the ReDi project later.

In this contribution, I will initially refer to the project's innovative theoretical background and then focus on the research results of the European ReDi project. Here I will explain the design of the ReDi project and emphasize its theoretical work, especially in relation to dialogical theology; I will also focus on the research results of one part of dialogical praxis, namely the analyses of interreligious dialog in urban areas. The other part of dialogical praxis is the educational field, which will be introduced briefly, as the results on education and dialog will be dealt with in detail in the following contributions of this special issue on *Religion & Education*.

Theoretical impulses: "The two pluralisms"

One of the main questions in RE today is how to conceptualize and structure learning processes in the context of religious and secular pluralization. From the range of theoretical positions that could be considered, I will focus on a sociological one. Here we see important developments in theoretical frameworks over the past 50 years. As one outstanding example for the development of theory, I would like to mention Peter L. Berger, of Boston University. In the 20th century, he was, for many decades, a globally acknowledged representative of secularization theory. However, by the turn of the millennium, he changed its position:

For about two centuries, the dominant paradigm for the understanding of the relationship between modernity and religion was the so-called secularization theory which was accepted both by those who welcomed the beginning of an allegedly secular age and of those who regretted it. ... The key thesis of the secularization theory can be expressed briefly and concisely. It is considered inevitable: The more modernity the less religion. Very smart. But—hélas—empirically untenable.¹³

Peter Berger had already relativized the weight of secularization in a public discussion in 2009, pointing out, "That modernity secularizes, necessarily secularizes, is wrong. Full stop. It is empirically wrong. What modernity necessarily does do, is: it pluralizes. That means, the traditional contents are relativized, are no longer so sure, no longer so self-evident."¹⁴

In recent years, Peter Berger went one step further, connecting both strands with each other: it is both a matter of increasing religious plurality and of a progressing secularization. Briefly expressed, his thesis is of "Two

pluralisms": "Actually, there are two pluralisms. There is religious pluralism in the usual sense of the term—several religions co-existing, more or less tolerantly, in the same society. There is also the pluralism of religion co-existing with a powerful secular discourse, without which a modern society could not exist."¹⁵

This thesis sounds simple but has far-reaching consequences for a fundamental understanding of the field of religion, secularity, society, and education.

Instead of looking at either religious pluralization or secularization in our societies, his new paradigm opens the possibility—even the necessity—of considering both the "co-existence of different religions and the co-existence of religious and secular discourses" as two sides of the same coin.¹⁶

This approach can serve as the background for more profound thought on religion and secularity at a time of increasing pluralization.

The ReDi project

Overview: Aims, levels of research and interdisciplinary composition

The ReDi project, conducted between 2013 and 2018, took up the topic of religious diversity and interreligious dialog, on which insufficient research results within the relevant academic disciplines were available,¹⁷ in an interdisciplinary and internationally comparative approach. From February 2013 to January 2018 the project team worked at the following two levels:

1. That of dialogical theology. Considering extant approaches of plural, intercultural and especially interreligious theology, a team of experts from different religious traditions developed a dialogical theology. The context-oriented nature of our research means that this refers in particular to observed forms of interreligious dialog in real life, which were to be studied at the second level.
2. That of dialogical practice. By applying methods of empirical sociology, we set out to study the beliefs about and the practice of interreligious dialog as it exists today. Our surveys included both actors inside religious communities, and those unaffiliated with them. Theological conceptions of religious pluralism that are rooted in the everyday experience of these actors were also an important focus of our work. Further, the possibilities and limitations of fostering interreligious dialog, especially in education, were studied in depth.

The research was designed in an internationally comparative way, relating to metropolitan areas: Beyond the central research location of Hamburg, Germany, the Rhine-Ruhr area was also included. In other parts

of Europe, studies were carried out in Scandinavia—focusing on Oslo and Stockholm—and also in London.

The task of the research was to process “interreligious dialog,” by means of various disciplinary approaches, in its basic conditions, and its different uses and functions, to record them in detail through the research process and then to analyze them systematically.

The ReDi project was designed as practice-oriented research addressing the fundamental questions of interreligious dialog, with regards to both its possibilities and limitations. Its interdisciplinary approach, including theology (and the humanities in general) along with social sciences and education, was chosen to facilitate the study of the complex phenomena of interreligious dialogical activity, especially in relation to their impact on social processes of integration and peacemaking.¹⁸

Dialogical theology: Conceptual approach, openness, and hermeneutics

The development of dialogically oriented theology and religious studies is, in our view, scientifically necessary and can, moreover, constitute a resource for the peaceful coexistence of people of different religious and ideological backgrounds. It is also important for addressing the question of whether and how far a RE, which is oriented toward interreligious dialog, is in accordance with, and can be supported by, religions and their believers.

Conceptional approach

Contrary to the assumption that religions are oriented toward demarcation and interreligious conflict, we analyzed how far there are core elements in the basic theological foundation of all religions that substantiate both dialog and the acceptance and appreciation of people of other religious and cultural affiliation.

Here we were able to refer back to previous research. During the past decades, the inclusion of a consideration of religious diversity in theology has been advanced by various approaches.¹⁹ This includes early efforts to establish an interreligious dialog by Hans Jochen Margull and Abdoldjavad Falaturi²⁰ and it is also true for the internationally well developed “Pluralist Theology of Religions.”²¹ Moreover, the exchange and encounter between religions is included in intercultural theology,²² interreligious theology²³ and also in comparative theology²⁴. Within these approaches, dialog has a role but is not at the center.

The situation is different than dialogical theology, which is worked out at the Academy of World Religions of Hamburg University and which—as the name indicates—puts dialog itself into the center of theology.²⁵

The contours of this approach have been developed during recent years but need to be worked out further in the future. For religious pedagogy, this approach can provide a theological backing for developing dialog-oriented, interreligious concepts of practice, which can be made as fruitful for community education as for RE in schools.

At this point, what is meant by the approach of a dialogical theology can only be indicated.²⁶ Let us first start with the question of how "dialogue" can be understood in the framework of a dialogical theology. Our preliminary answer is as follows:

We understand dialogue quite elementally as a relationship in mutuality, a conversation between one human being with another. It is humans who discover, in dialogue, that they are dependent on each other when they ask about interpretation and search for meaning. A dialogue is always a matter of opening up towards each other, possibly also changing in the process. In dialogue one may discover that the opinions and views of the Other are needed or can at least be very helpful for a better understanding of one's own identity and thoughts.²⁷

And a few sentences later, we see,

Dialogue is about the possibility of discovering something new by changing the perspectives: How I see Others, how I see myself with the eyes of Others, how I understand the texts, my own one and the texts of the Others.²⁸

The concern with making dialog central to theology cannot be developed from Christian theology alone but, rather, demands a shared theological effort from the spheres of other major religions such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism – in so far as the term "theology" can be used for Buddhism.²⁹ If dialog is placed at the center of theological thought, a denominationally limited theology seems insufficient. This is not only the argument of Christian theologians such as Küster³⁰, Bernhardt and Schmidt-Leukel³¹, and Leirvik.³² It is also the view of Paul Knitter in particular, who is simultaneously a Christian and a Buddhist, and who states his view succinctly in his book title "Ohne Buddha wäre ich kein Christ" (Without Buddha, I Would Not Be a Christian).³³ Also, from a Jewish perspective, Ephraim Meir considers an interreligious-dialogical theology to be indispensable for approaching present-day, central religious, and philosophical questions, which it is not possible to do in a narrow, denominational theology.³⁴

Reference to "context" has an important role in dialogical theology. Religions and their forms of expression are also interpreted within the framework of social and political parameters. For this, intercultural theology³⁵ provides an important reference point. Dialogical theology is connected with societal discussions about the shaping of the coexistence of people with different religions and cultures, and with analyzing dialog as it is practiced.³⁶ For example, Sallie B. King, from a Buddhist perspective,

presented a set of ideas and arguments related to the necessity of social engagement³⁷, whereas Anantanand Rambachan presented a liberation theology from a Hindu perspective.³⁸ Dialogical practice—and thus also dialogical theology—is considered imperative by Paul Knitter, as an ethical obligation that develops and shapes theology through its dialogical habitus.³⁹ Thus, Reinhold Bernhardt and Perry Schmidt-Leukel pointed out, "Understood as an attitude and a style, interreligious theological work remains reconnected with concrete dialog."⁴⁰

As discussed in more detail below, dialogical theology depends on openness toward Others. The question of openness toward Others is not about preserving or defending one's own position—and this is a high but indispensable demand for a dialog-oriented theology—but about developing the perspective of "trans-difference," as expressed by Ephraim Meir,⁴¹ or by the idea of "joined searching" as articulated by Paul Knitter.⁴²

The demand for dialogical theology consists in reflecting interreligious dialog, not only conceptually, but in analyzing it as a practiced activity. This is a core point of dialogical theology. We see a great relevance in the empirical or practical-theological analysis of actual dialog to develop an interreligious-dialogical hermeneutics. This idea will be discussed in the following passage.

Openness of the religions toward religious and cultural others

Are there basic concepts and demands anchored in the origins and traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, which—as a condition for dialog—promote openness toward people of other religions and worldviews? Answering this question is a complex endeavor. To that end, some preliminary considerations, before a report of selected results of our analyses, are included by way of example.

It seems that answers from the religions to questions arising today are inadequate without reference to the source texts. An analysis of fundamental texts from the religions under consideration is important in order to avoid a possible drift toward arbitrariness. This approach is not without problems: Thus, Reinhold Bernhardt, for example, was rightly critical of the fact that the vast majority of Evangelical theologians emphasize the missionary mandate connected with the message of Christ.⁴³ In each religion mentioned there are exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist, and dialog-oriented positions, which all find a justification from its fundamental documents. This must be kept in mind. Thus, it is important—as pointed out by Reinhold Bernhardt⁴⁴—to envisage not only individual parts of the text but to interpret them against the background of the basic orientation of a religion. Within this framework, then, the relevance of an openness