Review Essay: ‘Theology Made in Dignity’: Developments in Religious Education Theory in the German Speaking World

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Published online: 12 Feb 2014.


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2014.868254
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In almost every European country religion is in one way or another part of the school curriculum: optional or compulsory, as a subject related to the religious affiliation of the school or as part of the public school curriculum, as introduction in a particular religion or as multi-faith approach, and so on. The exceptions are Albania, France, and Slovenia. In these countries religion is not explicitly articulated in the classroom, which does not exclude of course its actual presence through the “lived” religions of young people on the playground. Historical observations could be made here on how religious and non-religious convictions and belief systems have influenced societies and
schools in Europe in the past. The actual provisions of religious education (RE) certainly depend on these local historical developments. However, since secularization and globalization changed the world into a complex network of diverse and often conflicting worldviews and more specifically since the events of 9/11, the content and scope of RE in Europe has shifted dramatically. It became an issue of public discourse, it was debated upon in the political circles of the European Union, it became actually connected to other school subjects such as “education for democratic citizenship” and it became a vivid topic in the midst of the classroom. Even in the aforementioned countries the discussion could no longer remain reduced to chats on the playground.

Apart from this epochal acceleration of interest in RE in schools in Europe, there is another reason why religion and worldview are so eminent in schools: they cannot be separated from the longstanding cultural–hermeneutical tradition of education in that same Europe. The German concept of Bildung defines the aim of education as identity formation, as the growing awareness of the self as “meaning giver,” responding to meaningful others, instigated by the teacher who introduces the child into a powerful and critical learning environment. Of course, this educational aim can also be found in non-European countries. And of course, philosophy or ethics can put this aim into practice as well. However, the fact that RE with its manifold historical reasons has obtained a regular place at school puts it in a privileged position to contribute to contemporary Bildung—but only on the condition that church and school boards are prepared to rethink and deepen RE in today’s context of moral and religious plurality.

In this article I review five German books on RE and hope to clarify the role of academic work in this field. The study of religion is a public topic in Europe through its articulated presence in schools, in teacher education centers and in universities. The reviewed books are all born in a school context. Without exaggeration one can argue that the school and its subject RE are the habitat for RE theory development in Europe. Another interesting point is that German RE is taught in theological faculties and institutes—and not in schools of education (which is rather the case in the United Kingdom). So the first reflection on RE is always theological and never these two can be disconnected. As a result a close relationship between school-related RE as part of practical theology and the other (biblical, systematic, and historical) theological disciplines can be discerned. This link implies also that the impact can come from both sides: from school to theology (e.g., how is theology generated by young people in the classroom?)
and from theology to school (e.g., how is the biblical idea of social justice represented in the school?).

The first book of this review article (Könemann & Mette 2013) picks up the last question. Thirteen German-speaking authors reflect on the political dimensions of RE. The work of the German educationalist and theologian Helmut Peukert is quoted several times: in order to guarantee the freedom of the human person to construct his/her own identity, space for solidarity should be provided and a culture of recognition should be cultivated in the classroom. People grow in “inter-subjective reflected self-awareness” (49) and in “inter-subjective creativity” (61)—so Peukert—which means that they originally can differ from each other in talents, but should all have the opportunity to develop their talents differently. Good education helps children to start learning together, helps them to understand their own specific contributions and brings them at the end of the day together again—in reflecting and re-collecting their newly gained insights. Children do not need “more” identity, they need a “better” identity (77), one that is fitting into their personal narration and into the larger context of a culture of recognition, of persons recognizing each other in their otherness. All of the papers included in this book add elements to the political agenda of RE: are the provisions at school child-friendly and gender-friendly? Is there a culture of memory, an interest in the past generations? What about the awareness of poverty at school? Is there room for art and for unpredictable questions and concerns in the classroom? One of the strongest political implications is drawn by the Dutch religious educationalist Kim de Wildt who plaids for a “RE for all”—no longer confined to the confessional boundaries of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim traditions. The German system is until today rather strict and stubborn in this; confessional groups are separated at school during RE and non-religiously affiliated children attend ethics or extra educational needs classes. I believe that De Wildt’s statement that the German system with its confessional separated RE classes is a *contradiction in terminis* (180) needs to be honored—which is by the way also the stance of one of the authorities in German RE, Norbert Mette, in the last book reviewed in this article (see below), not to mention other leading figures in Europe such as Robert Jackson (Warwick), Siebren Miedema (Amsterdam), and Wolfram Weisse (Hamburg)—all members of the prestigious REDCo Research Project.

In the second book (Schlag & Schweitzer 2011) the authors, respectively professors of protestant RE in Zürich (Switzerland) and Tübingen (Germany), engage in a reflection on the praxis of inviting
young people to become the agents of their own religious learning. They discuss the theological dignity of young people, emanating out of that praxis in schools and congregations. In their work they relate to the worldwide interest in children’s spirituality in the Anglo-Saxon world and in Kindertheologie (children’s theology) in the German speaking world, but focus here on the world of youth. They raise questions such as: “What is the theological value of the spiritual and religious language of young people? What is the impact of their fides qua on the development of the fides quae of a religious tradition? Which directions and connections do they spontaneously develop towards the so called official theologies of church and academia, when they reflect theologically on life issues related to their life world?”

The authors focus on the importance of the functionality (Lebensdienlichkeit) of theology in the lives of young people and use the concept of “lay theology,” in addition to more academic conceptions of theology (22–24 and 47–51). They argue that every person is allowed to and entitled to take part in the productive and receptive development of theological knowledge. The difference between a lay theologian (a child, and adolescent or an adult) and an academic professional theologian is not substantial, but gradual. Every human person has a unique destination in life and has the right and the duty to discover this gradually. Theology should therefore be a democratic enterprise.

In their book the authors discern substantially between “theology for youth,” “theology of youth,” and “theology with youth.” They are convinced that Bildung can stimulate young people in the development of their own theological thoughts and related actions, but they are also critical about the poor religious language offered by church and society. Young people deserve better. The book has been a catalyst and an eye opener in this respect. Recently a whole series of new publications, including concrete teaching materials, has seen the light.

The next book (Englert 2013) digs deeper into the “theology for youth” idea (39–42) and offers nineteen theological tractates for the classroom. Rudolf Englert, who is a professor of catholic RE in Duisburg-Essen (Germany), is convinced that young people can be inspired by the own logic of religion, if they are presented a broader view of the world, approachable through different lenses on reality. In the same way as Schlag and Schweitzer, Englert is questioning the resignation of academic theology to create a “human” religious language. The issue goes even deeper: all of the contemporary sciences are struggling with the “fundamental inability” (Grundaporie) to understand traditions hermeneutically (35). This is not only the case in RE, but in every segment of Bildung. Englert’s answer to
this situation is astonishing: he wrote a book in which he develops the central themes of fundamental “theo-logy” and challenges the reader, the teacher of RE, to learn from these mental “kicks” (for which he uses the typical German word *Denkanstöße*), before he/she enters the classroom and invites young people to take part in that same argumentative act. *Fides quaerens intellectum*, faith in search of reason, or in other words, lay theology with its own patterns of thought, can encompass many didactical modes: reflective, creative, literature-related, thought-experimental, and so on—as long as the religious-constitutive rationale of RE has been taken into consideration. The list of topics is overwhelming: the value of faith, the act of faith, religious experience, the word of God and God as a word, science and religion, agnosticism, the implications of faith for daily life, theodicy, and so on. The work of *Bildung* by the teacher still needs to be done. He/she needs to “liquefy” the substance of the tractates for every day classroom use, but in Englert’s book many strong threads to do so can be found.

Martin Jäggle is professor of catholic RE in Wien (Austria) and together with his colleagues he has published a book on the “culture of recognition” in schools (Jäggle and others 2013), based on the papers of an international interdisciplinary conference on this topic. Relying on the work of the Frankfurter social philosopher Axel Honneth, who describes three levels of recognition (emotional, juridical, and cultural), the Viennese group of researchers concentrates on the school as a place where young people can learn a culture of valuing and respecting the other. Human dignity, justice and participation are the key words in that culture. In the book an enormous range of reflections and concretizations is presented. Starting point is the mere perception of the plurality of moral and religious voices at school. In so many cases differences are not taken into consideration and personal and collective backgrounds of people are ignored. Only when people are taken seriously in their diversity, a culture of learning-in-difference can be at stake. Then they can start inviting each other in their otherness and play the game of “linguistic hospitality” (Paul Ricoeur). The book is a rich resource for practitioners, for school boards, teachers, teacher training students, and even pupils at school. In this respect the book realizes its own goal: every voice is heard and examined. Every voice has been recognized.

This review concludes with a book edited by Norbert Mette, emeritus professor in Dortmund, and Matthias Sellmann (2012), professor
in Bochum (Germany), both working in the field of practical theology. They report on the promising research project *Religionsunterricht als Ort der Theologie* (ROTh) (RE as *locus theologicus*), in which the variety of academic disciplines reflect on theology adaptable *for* the classroom and theology generating *from* the classroom. The project is unique in the way it brings together scholars of the three so called Ruhr-Universities, located in the midst of the post-industrial and multi-cultural Ruhr area in the western part of Germany. Young people in their search for meaning, often disconnected from communities and congregations, but brought together in the unique communication of the school, are considered to be the co-creators of a new culture, society and church (80–81). Therefore new contextualized ways of organizing RE are definitely needed. As already mentioned Norbert Mette argues for more confessional-cooperative and religious-cooperative forms of RE within the traditional framework of RE in Germany (357). Without this intervention the very issue of religion at school could disappear, which would mean that the original concern of *Bildung*—self-clarification and response-ability in a complex environment—would also evaporate. In the field of tension between old and new, between traditional solid forms of RE and the more fluid expectations of society today, the authors of this book re-frame their public-theological ideas and concerns for a better RE.

"Theology made in dignity," this seems to be the main line of thought in the presented books. The theological voice of young people should be heard, when we try to understand the world of today. The books offer directions and connections for the classroom, an important place of public theology. However, giving young people opportunities to deal constructively and creatively with the longstanding theological traditions in Europe (as part of their broader *Bildung*), the RE classroom needs to be challenged, revitalized, and re-contextualized over and over again. This should not be a problem, but rather a project—with an open end, promising, and hope-generating. What I seriously long for is more international academic exchange between continents, their languages and faith communities. I am sure, however, that the next generation of young theologians is already creating that path of encounter.

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