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Is Religion Underrated? A Position Paper on Educational Research in Religious Matters

Until the late 1960s, religion was an important part of educational research. Behind this was the recognition that religion was an important social subsystem alongside from politics, the economy, education, science, art, the legal system, the health system, the mass media and sports. Hardly anyone denied that young people must learn to live in all these social subsystems. One example among many is Eduard Spranger's personality theory in his book *Types of Men* (Lebensformen 1914; translation into English 1928) and his textbook *Psychologie des Jugendalters* (1924). Both volumes, in describing religious values and attitudes of people according to their theoretical, economic, aesthetic, social and political orientation, became standard reference works for students of education in West Germany. Since the late 1960s, however, educational scientists and even historians of education have shown little interest in the role of religion. Consequently, the contribution of religion and religious education "to the development of education has the potential to be underestimated" (Jacob/Leach/Spencer 2013, 693).¹

The reasons for this development are easily explained. On the one hand, religious education became a special research area for theologians and religious education teachers (*Historische Religionspädagogik*). On the other hand, most educational scientists became believers in the secularization thesis. This thesis states that religion has lost its authority in all aspects of economic, aesthetic, social, and political life. Following this rationale, researchers became blind to the transformation of religion in modern societies. Today, the significance of religion can be shown in geopolitical hotspots such as the Middle East, Asia, Russia, the USA, and South America. Even in Europe religion and religious education have played a significant role in recent years. Educational leaders today debate a number of key topics like the appropriateness of certain models of Islamic religious education at schools, the division between the state and religious communities in educational matters, and the relation between Islam and the West. For these reasons, the historiography of religious education has become an important part of religious education research in the last two decades. In addition to numerous individual research projects on classical masterminds of (religious) education such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, the historiography of religious education has focused on the history of learning materials and methods, media, institutions, ideas, attitudes, and discourses (see Schröder 2009; Wischmeyer 2014a). Nevertheless, it needs to be mentioned that educational historians have shown little interest in the results of historians of religious education (see Oelkers/Osterwalder/Tenorth 2003). Taking a critical look at themselves, however, it must also be noticed that historians of religious education have lost touch with international develop-

1 Furthermore, Rob Freathy observes that "the historiography of education for citizenship often neglects to provide a detailed analysis of Christian perspectives and frequently treats them as archaic precursors to 'real' secular versions of education for citizenship, which emerged later" (Freathy 2008, 296), and James Arthur writes that "some contemporary educationists have underestimated the continuing importance of Christian and other religious perspectives on education" (Arthur 2012, 340).

ments in historic methodology (see Wischmeyer 2014). Therefore, my position paper on educational research in religious matters defines what historians of education as well as of religious education can learn from each other. For that purpose, I introduce the historical theory of *Bildungsräume* as a means of analyzing the transnational history of religious education (see Fuchs/Kesper-Biermann 2011; Fuchs 2012). Borrowing this format used by historians, educational research should engage three important questions.

1 Which Non-national Actors and Global Religious Networks Can Be Observed in the Field of Religious Education?

A key example of a non-national actor in the field of religious education in the 1920s is the American Reverend Henry A. Atkinson. He spent much time in Europe on behalf of a global religious network, the Church Peace Union. Furthermore, he worked to support the rights of religious minorities all over the world and condemned the increase of anti-Semitism in Germany in the 1930s. He also spent time and energy informing the Religious Education Association of the United States and Canada about the relationship between religion and state schools in France, England and Germany. His focus on international comparison was motivated by his understanding of “the real purpose” of religious education all over the world: “The real purpose of all educational effort is to fit the individual to live the best possible life both for his own happiness and for the good of the group of which he is a part. The task of the school is to develop the individual for his own sake, in order that, in turn, he may contribute the most to the development of society. The nearer we approach to perfection in the social order, the more nearly we approach a condition where ideal individuals are developed. The ideal is therefore after all the perfect coordination and interplay of these two fundamental principles. Religion of some kind is essential to every well-rounded life. All education must take into account the ethical and spiritual needs of the individual, for only as these ideals become part of the equipment of man can society be said to be religious. The educators of every nation today recognize this fact and various systems in different countries are being tried to meet the need” (Atkinson 1927, 241).

Regarding studies of scholarship on religion and education, there are further important actors and networks in the field of (religious) education, such as “mission and missionaries”, “convents and women religious”, “churchmen, clergy and charitable societies”, and “Anglicans, Dissenters, Roman Catholics, Jews” (see Raftery 2012). Many articles examine mission activity and its impact on education in African countries, in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, North America, South America, and the Caribbean. Additionally, a minor but increasing amount of research exists on transnational networks of convent schools as locations for female learning. Moreover, several articles focus on church leaders and clergy as tyrannical teachers for boys in Australia, England, and Ireland without examining the transnational dimension of abuse of children in both Protestant and Roman Catholic schools. Finally, the development of Sunday schools and Methodist elementary schools in the USA, England, and other European countries serves as an example for the transference of organizational models from one country into another.

These examples seek to address the question of how network theories can be applied to educational research in religious matters, mainly from a transnational perspective (see Fuchs 2007, 197): What defines a network in the field of religious education? Do ‘routes of travel’ (i.g. those of Atkinson in the 1920), communication (i.g. through mission and missionaries)

or institutions (i.g. the Religious Education Association) already constitute networks? And, more importantly: Which media function as the main supporter of the globalization process?

2 Which Media Function as the Main Supporter of the Globalization Process in the Field of Religious Education?

Theological and pedagogical knowledge is created, transported and transformed through various modes of communication (the textual, the visual, or the material), through mission activity and networks of convent schools across spaces, and through media (see Thyssen/Priem 2013). Therefore, media such as learning materials and methods, illustrated children's Bibles and the Koran, journals and dictionaries, encyclopedias and editions in the fields of theology and education should play an important part in the historiography of religious education. One example is the official journal of the Religious Education Association of the United States and Canada. Founded in 1906, it functioned as a supporter of the globalization process by delivering professional knowledge and learning materials. Apart from the article by Atkinson mentioned above, there are further articles on the relationship between state schools and religion all over the world, i.g. in Russia, Turkey, China and Japan (see Spinka 1927; Jard 1927). Their focus lies on the processes of modernization and secularization in the framework of national governments: "Russia and Turkey were countries totally dissimilar in culture and religion, as well as hostile in the political sphere; nevertheless, in one respect they bore a marked resemblance. Until comparatively recent times, they were the only remaining absolute monarchies, and both found the chief support for their uncompromising absolutism in theocratic sanctions. The process of overthrow of this anachronous form of government was likewise similar, and at present, in spite of the many and fundamental differences, the two powers are alike at least in this respect that the dominant tendency prevailing is modernization, which is at present a synonym for secularization of the entire structure of the national government" (Spinka 1927, 248).

Another example is the *Encyklopädie des gesamten Erziehungs- und Unterrichtswesens*, published by Karl Adolf Schmid (1st edition 1859-1875; 2nd edition 1876-1887). The objective of this German encyclopedia was to describe the educational systems in the civilized world. Consequently, a wide range of articles refers to the educational systems all over the world (including Sunday Schools as an organizational model of religious education in the USA and England and its reception in Germany) as well as learning materials and methods (such as the 'Bell-Lancaster method') (see Wischmeyer 2014b).²

3 Which Organizational Models are Transferred from One Country into Another?

Today, several types of religious education have been established at schools in Europe (see Schreiner 2014). Due to the principle of laïcité there is no subject such as religious education in France (type 1). There is denominational religious education organized by religious communities in countries like Hungary, Poland, Belgium and Ireland (type 2). There is also a non-confessional religious education organized by the state in countries like England, Wales, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway (type 3). There is a denominational religious education or-

2 Further examples of religious education reform movements in the United States and in Germany as a paradigmatic response to modernization are described in Osmer/Schweitzer (1997) and Osmer/Schweitzer (2003).

ganized exclusively by the state in Greece, Spain, and Italy (type 4). And there is a balanced cooperation between the state and religious communities in Germany (type 5).

Numerous publications on this topic show that each national and regional approach has its own complex history (see Jackson/Miedema/Weiße/Willaime 2007). However, what is still missed are analytic criteria for transfer processes between these nations and regions: Are there references to an external model of religious education? Can these references be described as externalization or reception (for this concept of “lending and borrowing” see Steiner-Khamsi 2002 and Fuchs 2012, 9)? Are there modifications of one’s own model of religious education (re-contextualization or implementation)? And is there a metamorphosis into a local model (internalization or indigenization)?

One example for these transnational processes of “lending and borrowing” is the diversity of religious education in Switzerland: In the French-speaking (and French-influenced) cantons of Geneva and Neuenburg there is complete separation between church and state (type 1), whereas in some parts of Switzerland (Zürich: “Religion and Culture”, Aargau: “Ethics and Religion”, Bern: “nature-human being-co-world”) there are references to an external model of religious education in Germany (Brandenburg: “*Lebensgestaltung-Ethik-Religionskunde*” as a non-confessional religious education organized by the state, type 3). In the majority of the German-speaking cantons, however, there is some form of cooperation (types 2, 4 and 5): “State recognized religious communities (normally the Swiss Reformed and Roman Catholic Churches, but in Basel the Old Catholic Church and Jewish community also) are in charge of the R[eligious] E[ducation] in schools where it is taught by their representatives visiting the schools. Where state related R[eligious] E[ducation] is taught this is done by teachers in the school employed by the state. The presence of Turkish immigrants is raising problems for the teaching of R[eligious] E[ducation] in certain areas since Islam has not been traditionally state recognized” (Kohler-Spiegel 2005, 171).

Comparative research in religious education has traditionally limited itself to national politics and the relation of state schools to religion. Therefore, the reconstruction of globalization processes in the field of religious education should also focus on non-national actors and transnational networks (such as the Roman Catholic Church or communities of Turkish immigrants) by examining a wide range of media (such as journals and encyclopedias, but also learning materials, methods, illustrated children’s Bibles etc.).

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, my demand for international comparison and transnational perspectives in religious matters should receive a positive echo both in educational research and religious education research. In the course of the transnational approach, the categories of “non-national actors and global religious networks” as well as “media” and “organizational models” are also preferable for the analysis of transnational and global processes in the field of Islam and Islamic education. Furthermore, several types of religious education in European countries should be examined by looking at how they try to integrate Islam into the national school systems. By doing so, the contribution of religion and religious education to modern societies can no longer be underrated.

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