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Integrative Religious Education in Europe. A Study-of-Religions Approach. By WANDA ALBERTS. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007. 442 pp. ISBN 978-3-11-019661-0.

The Study of Wanda Alberts provides a detailed analysis of different approaches to Religious Education (RE) in England and Sweden as well as an emphatic recommendation for what the author calls integrative RE — a non-confessional, impartial, study-of-religions-based approach to religions at school.

The notion of ‘Integrative RE’ serves as a platform to include any concept of how to deal with the plurality of religions in schools. Therefore it is plausible to concentrate on the English and Swedish context, where these questions have been discussed for years. The author is familiar with the situation in these countries holding in mind other European examples. This leads to a well-informed and very helpful overview of the most interesting models and theories of RE in Europe.

The main section of the study is an analytical part, which is introduced by a solid description of the local “history and organisation of integrative RE” (86–110). For England there are nine current approaches to RE presented (111–210): The “Westhill Project”, “A Gift to the Child”, the “Experiential Approach”, the “Interpretative Approach”, the “Critical Approach”, the “Constructivist Approach”, the “Narrative Approach”, the “Chichester Project”, and the “Stapleford Project” (the last two have been developed for the teaching of Christianity).

The most elaborated and also the most favoured by the author is the ‘Interpretative Approach’, developed by Robert Jackson in the ‘Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit’. Children first require “a development of interpretive skills, which are necessary for the kind of understanding attempted.” Understanding gives rise to “the deepening of one’s self-understanding by studying other world-views edification, a new perspective on the familiar as a result of a study of the unfamiliar.” (143)

Each English approach as well as the Swedish one (211–289), is scrutinized for the underlying concept of religion and notion of education. This analytical structure answers to the two academic disciplines which are significant for integrative RE: study of religions and educational theory; at the beginning of the book, the reader is introduced to these two disciplines (8–85). In the Interpretative Approach for example, the concept of religion derives from a critical reading of phenomenology, combined with principles of the interpretative anthropology from Clifford Geertz and ideas of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. (144)

The author discusses the findings (290–311) in the wider European context: Regarding Alberts it is not useful to follow the famous taxonomy,

“education into religion”, “education about religion”, and “education from religion”. It is remarkable that her construction of a classification does not start from the empirical findings themselves but from a summary of different European solutions. The systematic question of how integrative RE is realised leads to three possibilities (324): “integrative RE as an individual subject” (example Norway and one can add: England and Sweden), “teaching about different religions in separative confessional or ‘alternative’ subjects” (Germany), and “inclusion of aspects of integrative RE in other parts of the curriculum” as a “learning dimension” (Netherlands).

However, towards the end of the study Alberts formulates more and more normative decisions, when she gives her own ideas of how religion should be taught in European (public?) schools. In this sense the climax of the book is the last part. This “framework for integrative RE in Europe” (353–388) is based on a “non-religious profile” (355) and a theory of critical citizenship education. It claims to be a “general educationally consistent model which may be modified [...] in the individual countries” to “ensure that all pupils in Europe learn about religious plurality” (353).

Both the descriptive and the normative aspects of this courageous study contribute remarkably to the contemporary discussion: The study provides clear orientation in the field of RE in England and Sweden with further information about Norway, Germany and The Netherlands. The academic study of religions often has — I agree with Alberts — difficulties in serving for practical interests; one can take a look at what has already happened to some of the theories.

Naturally the normative proposition may provoke more opposition, especially from the academic study of religions. For example, Alberts advocates an individual compulsory school RE subject, and rejects to combine integrative RE with other subjects. In my experience Swiss educationalists at the moment are vividly discussing subject groups, which are including better established subjects such as biology, geography, and history etc. These are debates dependent on fashions as well as on financial questions. It might be unrealistic to insist on an independent subject. In some parts of the book, especially towards the end, Alberts argues rather idealistically.

The advantage of the book is that Alberts strengthens and encourages emphatically the discipline study of religions; this is honourable and absolutely necessary in the actual situation. Therefore she adopts a very critical attitude against Christian theology — but she is less suspicious about educational theory.

The irritating point of the study for the academic study of religions is the educational foundation. The educational part is prominently expressed when

Alberts identifies the “major challenge” as “finding ways of bridging the two dimensions of the subject: the descriptive dimension [...] and the existential dimension” (307). Most scholars of study of religions would not accept that sort of “challenge” at the university. But is it nonetheless a necessary challenge at school? Whereas all theological claims to enrich pupils’ personalities are strictly disapproved by Alberts, the educational care for the existential dimension is protected and put as a challenge. “The distinction between these two dimensions is perhaps the main difference between the academic study of religions [...] and concepts for integrative RE” (359).

The introduction to the two disciplines at the very beginning does not fulfil the reader’s expectations as an opening explication of method or theoretical presuppositions for the following analysis. Instead the disciplines are presented because of their contribution to integrative RE. Therefore, I would have preferred a placing before the new “framework of RE” because the sketch of study of religions is not exactly what the protagonists of the nine presented approaches deal with. The descriptive, presented frameworks are nearly all directed from an educational scientific context. Their advocates for the scientific discussion of religion are scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, Ninan Smart (112), Alister Hardy (130), or Rudolf Otto (125). Alberts does very well in criticising these concepts.

An exception is the ‘Interpretative Approach’ by Robert Jackson (142–162), who shows the most intensive reception of modern study of religions and the criticism of phenomenology. Here we can find authors like Clifford Geertz and Jacques Waardenburg. The Swedish discussion is more elaborate too. But in both cases, educational principles have gained a powerful influence, and many study-of-religions scholars would not be able to recognize their discipline.

The strange placement of the introduction abets the misunderstanding that the actual state of the art is fully considered in educational debates on RE. Though the introduction of the discipline shows what Alberts wants the basis for integrative RE to be, it actually doesn’t.

The methodological frame of study of religions itself — the subject I am more familiar with than educational theory — is a contested field. Alberts presents a remarkable summary with a slightly Marburg-centred view. From the beginning she gives a hand to educational application. Important research fields, which are less relevant for classroom teaching, are omitted, for example cognitive theory. It’s a pity that there is no reference to the field of geography and religion, which is highly relevant for RE — maybe the threat of a subject group geography-religion has influenced the author. Taking into account that one cannot expect every nuance in a 40-page introduction, we must consider

the function of the part of the book: The presentation of study of religions seems to be written for educationalists and vice versa.

To sum up: It is not a historical or empirical study from the bottom up, but a necessary one. The study relies on a bridge between the study of religions and educational theory; therefore it may be attacked from both sides. It is not easy to venture out between two disciplines. Nevertheless, Alberts has raised the central question of how a fair study-of-religions representation of religions may be accommodated (and transformed!) within educational theory.

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