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The article has its focus on Christian religious education and the Christian (theological) understanding of religious education (including the relationship between religious education and moral education), as opposed to a generic (religious studies) understanding of religious education across different religions. At the same time, it includes the awareness of today's multi-religious contexts and the tasks of inter-religious education. It is based on a theological point of view but it also refers to theology's multidisciplinary contexts, especially in the fields of general education and the social sciences but also in respect to legal aspects in the relationship between state-sponsored educational institutions like the school and issues of neutrality and commitment. The breakdown of the article follows the distinction between (1) a historical perspective concerning the development of Christian religious education, (2) a systematic perspective concerning theological as well as educational and societal rationales of Christian religious education, its goals and its shape, including the relationship between theology and the philosophy of education, (3) an empirical perspective which is of growing importance in this field both in terms of capturing the reality of religious education as well as in terms of evaluation, and which must be in close conversation with the social sciences and psychology, and (4) a practical perspective which, even if necessarily only briefly, refers to teaching methods as well as other practical tasks.

Keywords: Religious education, Theology and Education, Children, History of religious education, Religious development, Catechesis, Philosophy of education, Religious demographics, Empirical perspectives, Psychology of religion, Theory and praxis

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1 Introduction

The term religious education has a twofold meaning. It can be understood as a practice that engages mostly young people in different contexts (family, church, school, etc.). Yet it also refers to an academic discipline, most often as part of theology or educational studies. Both meanings have roots in the Bible or the early church, which indicates that religious education is an integral part of the Christian tradition (as well as, in different ways, of the Jewish tradition and other religious traditions), even if the term 'religious education' itself was not commonly used before modernity. This article focuses on Christian religious education and the Christian (theological) understanding of religious education (including the relationship between religious education and moral education), as opposed to a generic (religious studies) understanding of religious education across different religions. At the same time, this article proceeds with an awareness of today's multi-religious contexts and the goals of interreligious education. It adopts a theological perspective, while also referring to theology's multidisciplinary contexts, especially in the fields of general education and the social sciences, but also with respect to legal aspects of the relationship between state-sponsored educational institutions (e.g. schools) and issues of neutrality and commitment. Yet the focus chosen here implies that other possible perspectives – for example, from social history or sociology – will not be given equal attention in this article.

The structure of the article follows the distinctions between (1) a historical perspective concerning the development of Christian religious education over time, (2) a systematic perspective concerning theological as well as educational and societal rationales for Christian religious education, its goals and its shape, including the relationship between theology and the philosophy of education, as well as religious education as an academic discipline, (3) an empirical perspective which is of growing importance in this field both in terms of capturing the reality of religious education as well as in terms of evaluating its effects and effectiveness, and which must remain in close conversation with the social sciences and psychology, and (4) a practical perspective which, even if discussed only briefly, refers to the different practical fields and contexts of religious education today, including teaching methods and other practical tasks. The rationale for this structure corresponds to the Encyclopaedia's emphasis on scriptural and theological aspects. The division into historical, philosophical, empirical, and practical perspectives is meant to allow for a broader treatment of the topic than will be found in many contemporary textbooks which tend to overlook the fact that many questions concerning religious education can only be answered by including the historical background as well as contemporary developments and results from empirical research.

2 Historical perspective

Any attempt at describing the history of religious education, even within Christianity, in a single article and by using a single perspective is a futile endeavour. As with other aspects of the history of Christianity or of history in general, one must be aware of the many different traditions and contexts around the world which cannot be captured in one article. Moreover, Jewish religious education and Muslim religious education, for example, have histories of their own (cf. Demsky et al. 2007; Günther 2020). The present author's perspective has definitely been shaped by his location in Germany and central European Protestantism. For this reason, it is important to make readers aware of this limitation and encourage them to refer to more specialized literature about religious education in different geographical, denominational, and religious contexts. It must also be noted, however, that there is a lack of recent publications in English concerning the history of religious education (as a classic on education in antiquity, see Marrou 1958; recent views are summarized by Damm 2019. For general overviews on the history of Christian education, see Gangel and Benson 1983; Reed and Prevost 1993; Elias 2002), while general histories of Christianity often do not pay much attention to religious education.

Another issue is related to different denominational traditions. Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant religious education, in particular, exhibit distinct characteristics which can only be fully understood by studying the different theologies of religious education connected to these traditions (Miller 1995). Since the limited scope of this article does not allow for such an in-depth exploration, readers are encouraged to consult more specialized literature (for Orthodox religious education cf. Tarasar 1995; Vrame 2006; for Roman Catholic religious education cf. Warren 1983; Buchanan and Gellel 2019; for Protestant religious education cf. Osmer 1990; Little 1995; Kim, Osmer and Schweitzer 2018). Studying the traditions and views of religious education from different denominations and religions comparatively, can also contribute to a better understanding of the theological and educational presuppositions of one's own views. At the same time, it makes one aware of the limitations of generic approaches to this field which, until today, is characterized by divisions and patterns which correspond to particular denominations and different theologies or religions.

2.1 Biblical foundations

First of all, it should be made clear that the Bible does not include anything like a coherent description of religious education or of the tasks related to it. There is no biblical pedagogy in this sense. Nevertheless, there are biblical references to and implications for religious education and education in general. Such references and implications have remained important in past and present, not only in terms of historical reminiscence but also in a normative sense, for example, in terms of a theological anthropology of the child.

In the Bible, references to religious education feature most prominently in the Old Testament. That they are less common in the New Testament is sometimes explained by the tension between the shortness of time before the expected return of Christ and the long time it takes for children to grow up. The probably most well-known educational scene in the Old Testament is found in Deut 6:20–21: ‘When your children ask you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?” then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand”’. According to these verses, the biblical faith is to be transferred to future generations by narrative and explanation. In other places, the religious importance of education in general is praised (for example, Prov 4:1–9). The whole body of Old Testament wisdom literature pursues educational purposes (see, for example, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes).

In the New Testament, Jesus is frequently described as a teacher, especially in the Gospels. Moreover, teaching is also viewed as a basic task of Christian congregations. Paul considers the gift of teaching a special charisma (Rom 12:7). Later, one can also speak of a teaching office which is indispensable for Christian congregations as well as for individual life (Eph 4:11). Its purpose is to make faith understandable and to help individuals to gain orientation in matters of faith (Eph 4:14: ‘We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine’). As a presupposition of religious education, Jesus’ new appreciation of children must also be mentioned in this context (Gundry-Volf 2001; Weber 1979). In antiquity, children were often considered less important and less valuable than adults. In some cases, children were not taken care of by their parents because, for example, they were girls instead of the hoped-for boys. Against this background, Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God belonging to children (Mark 10:14) clearly stands out. Moreover, Jesus equates serving children with serving God (Mark 9:37). Jesus even called children models for adults who have to ‘become like children’ if they wish to enter the kingdom of God (Matt 18:3).

Beyond such explicit biblical references to education, the Bible also includes a number of theological or anthropological images and ideas which later became very influential in the field of education. This is true for the human’s likeness of God (Gen 1:27). Today, this likeness is considered a strong basis for human rights, including the right to education. In the New Testament, the view of the human as being transformed into the new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) has been the starting point for Christian interpretations of educational and human development.

The Bible, and the New Testament in particular, shows that there is an inner relationship between the Christian faith and education. This relationship is most obvious concerning the nature of the Christian faith. Faith is related to the testimony to Jesus Christ and has, consequently, a clear and indispensable scriptural basis. Christian faith means having a

relationship with Jesus Christ, which is not possible without coming to know him through being acquainted with the biblical traditions describing him and his teaching. Compared to various Greek and Roman cults of the time, the Christian faith is not a mystery, only accessible through mystical intuition. Indeed, faith must be firmly based on scripture which, in turn, becomes accessible through explanation and education. Within the New Testament, the most famous passage concerning the need of education comes from Acts 8 where Philip encounters a traveller from Ethiopia: Philip 'heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"' (Acts 8:30–31).

In sum, at last some guidelines for religious education can be said to have a clear biblical foundation, including the introduction of the biblical tradition to new generations, regarding the high value of education in general and of religious education in particular, the teaching task of congregations, for the obligation and ideal of individual Christians to be erudite in matters of faith and, last but not least, regarding responsibilities towards children and the appreciation of children's faith. Although more applicable to later times than to the New Testament, one should also mention the emergence of Christian formation in the Bible, especially as exemplified in the letter to the Ephesians (especially Eph 4).

2.2 Religious education and the catechumenate of the early church

In the first centuries of the early church there was a notable tension between religious education in Christian families and the religious influences of the Graeco-Roman schools. These schools included many references to the Graeco-Roman religions which, at least to some degree, were also taught in these schools. Nevertheless, the early Christians relied on reading and writing skills because their scripture-based religion required such skills on many occasions. Consequently, they could not avoid Graeco-Roman schools in order for their children to acquire literacy skills, even if they were critical of the religious content their children would inevitably encounter there.

At that time, baptism of adults was the standard procedure. Adults who wanted to become Christians would, however, not be baptized right away but only after a longer period of Christian instruction and after having proven the sincerity of their wish to be baptized by demonstrating a Christian way of life. This time period before baptism was turned into an institution which followed set rules and procedures, generally referred to as the catechumenate.

It was in the context of the catechumenate that the first theoretical publications addressing teachers working as catechists became available. One of the most famous examples is Augustine's *The First Catechetical Instruction* (see 1952). In this small book Augustine gives advice to a catechist named Deogratias. The advice addresses perennial challenges

to religious education. What content should be selected for Christian instruction and how can the instruction be adapted to different groups of learners, given their different abilities and prior knowledge of religion and the Christian faith? Other early publications on religious education addressed the parents as religious educators, among others emphasising Christian ethics and an education based on this ethics, in other words, ideas which come closer to Christian formation than is the case with the New Testament (Guroian 2005). Although Augustine and some of his contemporaries can be praised as pioneers of systematic catechetical instruction, it should also be noted that Augustine has been critiqued for projecting negative and ultimately destructive views of children (Stortz 2005).

Child baptism became the norm during the Middle Ages. Because of the young age of the children at baptism, pre-baptismal instruction was not possible anymore and so the catechumenate ceased to exist. Religious education was then left to the parents and to a few available schools in the Middle Ages. A notable exception were the monasteries which offered religious education to novices and, in some cases, maintained schools as well. However, it was not before the Reformation of the sixteenth century that the interest in catechetical preparations was renewed in a broad sense within Christianity.

2.3 New impulses from the Reformation and the Confessional Age

The Reformation was characterized by a strong focus on renewing the faith and on reforming the church. Yet, given the high degree to which church and society were interwoven at that time, it was obvious that no reform of the church could be successful without reforming society as well. Education was an important key for unlocking social reforms. The Reformers' new understanding of the Christian faith presupposed that people were able to understand this faith, but this would not be possible in the absence of sufficient education, and religious education in particular.

Yet, the Reformers' interest in religious education was not only based on social necessities but also on a combination of several theological reasons. First of all, in contrast to pre-Reformation thinkers, justification by faith was understood by the Reformers as a direct relationship between God and the individual believer, without the church as an intermediary. Moreover, individual faith was to find its basis and measure in scripture. In other words, individual faith was not considered an intuitive feeling or private revelation but as growing out of understanding the Christian faith through scripture. This understanding, particularly concerning Jesus Christ, can only be gained from the biblical tradition and testimony.

For this reason, the Reformers took decisive steps towards making education available for all people, especially for children and youth but also for adults, so that they would be

able to read the Bible themselves. Catechisms were developed to introduce people to the core content of the Christian faith (Luther's catechisms and the [Reformed] Heidelberg Catechism became the most famous ones but there were many others at the time). New forms of teaching were introduced, such as regular sermons based on the catechisms. However, the father of the house was also admonished to devote time to catechetical teaching at home. Moreover, existing schools were to be transformed into truly Christian schools while many new schools were founded on the basis of Christian teaching. The Reformers demanded that all boys and, to a lesser extent, all girls should attend school. It was in this context that a new school subject began to take shape, namely 'religious education'. Such views are found among Lutherans and Reformed theologians (Reed and Prevost 1993: 189–202). Many of these ideas and demands, however, did not imply that they could actually be realized, at least not in the sixteenth century. In Germany, for example, where Luther had worked, it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that all children attended school on a regular basis.

During the following centuries – commonly referred to as the Confessional Age because of the dominating conflict between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestantism in many European countries – religious education, including the new school subject of religious education, became important as a means for protecting people from being converted. While the school subject of religious education emerged among Protestants, Roman Catholics soon came to see its advantages as well. Moreover, Catholic catechisms also gained in importance. Catholics and Protestants increasingly used their catechisms not only for explaining the Christian faith but also for cautioning their followers not to fall prey to the errors of other Christian denominations and groups.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Christian educators began to include social and economic factors, in addition to catechetical instruction. Continued wars at that time had left whole European countries devastated. Because of such large-scale devastation, children needed social and material help before they could be taught. It is against this backdrop that Pietist educators like August Hermann Francke developed an approach to religious education coupled with social work (Bunge 2005b). This was the beginning of a tradition that continues to this day, with church-led educational institutions for orphans as well as other children and youth with special needs.

Although traditional accounts of the history of Christian education rarely mention this, colonial forms of religious education, whose origins can be traced to the sixteenth century, assumed more and more importance in the eighteenth century. Such forms of religious education sometimes established a contradictory mixture of missionary efforts to Christianize other parts of the world by spreading the gospel beyond Europe, while simultaneously giving support to political efforts of securing obedience to colonial authorities and preparing the natives for colonial economic needs by means of education.

Currently the contradictory colonial tradition of religious education is addressed critically in the debates on postcolonialism (as examples concerning Africa and Asia cf. Matemba 2021; Baring 2022).

2.4 The transformation of religious education in modernity and postmodernity

With modernity and the European Enlightenment, religious education came under a double pressure. On the one hand, the rising belief in autonomous reason as the only legitimate guideline of knowing undermined the credibility and authority of all religious traditions. On the other hand, the emergence of modern education led to a severe and far-reaching criticism of traditional forms of teaching in the shape of instruction. Immanuel Kant's view on the relationship between faith and reason based on human autonomy (*Religion within the boundaries of mere reason*, see 1996) can be considered the corollary of the first form of pressure, while Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*Emile or on Education*, see 1979), who is often considered the first truly modern philosopher of education and the inventor of modern childhood, exemplifies the second form of pressure.

In this situation, new directions for both the theory and practice of religious education had to be developed. Friedrich Schleiermacher's work in early nineteenth century can be considered a prime example of this (DeVries 2005). Schleiermacher recast theology by placing it within an anthropological framework which allows him to demonstrate the legitimate place of religion and religious education within the sphere of human existence. In his famous *On religion. Speeches to its cultured despisers* (see 1996) from 1799, he operates with a distinction between science (*Metaphysik*), morality (*Moral*) and religion (*Religion*). He strongly suggests all three are to be equally respected and that no education deserves to be called complete unless it includes the religious dimension. Moreover, religious education should no longer follow an instructionist model but should give support to children's own religious development.

Be it explicitly or implicitly, many religious educators around the world have come to base their understanding of religious education on anthropological views. At the same time, others insist, for example following Karl Barth's theology, that religious education should never be reduced to a dimension or part of human experience but should find its basis in God's revelation.

Social modernization as it developed in the Western world during the nineteenth and twentieth century, however, was more than new ideas. Most significantly, it entailed far-reaching processes of social transformation, for example due to industrialization and urbanization (Osmer and Schweitzer 2003b). The introduction of new institutions of Christian education can be seen in this context. In the late eighteenth century, the Sunday School was introduced, first in England in response to the lack of educational opportunities

for children of the new working class, and later in the United States of America with the colonization of the American West (Lynn and Wright 1971). During the nineteenth century, Christian youth organizations like the YMCA and the Boy Scouts were similarly founded in the context of industrialization and new challenges of social life. However, it was most likely the introduction of mandatory schooling which brought about the most far-reaching changes for all education, including religious education. In those countries where religious education was a regular school subject, almost every child could be reached by school-based religious education for the first time in history.

With these societal changes emerged new ideas of how religion and education should be related to each other within the context of the school. Legal conflicts resulted in non-denominational religious education in schools being supported by the state (England) or in the exclusion of religious education from state schools altogether (United States and France). These developments became influential in many other countries beyond the Western world as well. When denominational religious education was discontinued in England it was replaced with non-confessional forms, which fit well with new approaches in philosophy of education. John Dewey (1952), for example, maintained the view that there should be a 'common faith' as the basis for education – an idea, however, which does not do justice to religious differences, tensions, and conflicts.

While the challenges connected to modernity and the enlightenment are still with us, additional challenges have made themselves felt in the twenty-first century. Most significantly, post-modernity has, together with globalization, international migration, worldwide economic and ecological crises, brought about a new awareness of the plurality of religious and non-religious worldviews (Osmer and Schweitzer 2003b; Schweitzer 2004; see Postmodern Philosophy and Theology). This situation strongly affects not only society in general but also religious education. Sociologist of religion Peter Berger (1979) coined the expression 'heretical imperative', which can be applied in many countries. No religious tradition is a given anymore, but the individual has to make a personal choice among different traditions, within or beyond Christianity. As a consequence, young people no longer consider membership in a Christian church as something which they have inherited from their parents and which they themselves cannot change. If they should be interested in the church and in the Christian faith it must be because they have found them attractive and convincing, independently of their religious backgrounds. Decreasing membership rates in many parts of the Western world testify to this phenomenon.

2.5 Critical reflections on the history of religious education

In the last thirty or forty years, more and more critical reflections concerning the history of religious education have emerged – for example, from the perspectives of feminist theology, liberation theology, and postcolonial studies. This critical engagement has raised

questions that have come to be considered as theologically valid as well as educationally well-justified. These questions refer to the ways in which religious education has treated certain groups of people or has dealt with issues of power and inequality. The most important examples are issues of race and discrimination, oppression, gender, disability, diversity, and abuse. Although some religious educators of the past were quite critical of the insufficient role which such issues played in mainstream discussions regarding religious education, it was not until the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century that more attention was given to them, partly due to the influence of deconstructivism and the critique of (hidden) power structures as exposed by Foucault and others, especially concerning religion (Golder 2007). It is evident that much more attention must be given to such critical evaluations in the future. Theological reflections on (religious) education need to be grounded not only in the history of ideas but must also refer critically to the realities of education on a worldwide level. It must be demonstrated that theological interpretations of (religious) education are truly liberating, not only in theory but also in practice.

The need for (self-)critical perspectives is especially obvious concerning the abuse of children and youth. Both physical as well as sexual abuse seem to have been connected to religious education, although the nature of this connection must be researched much more thoroughly in the future. It may be an exaggeration when Lloyd deMause (1974: 1) deems the history of childhood a 'nightmare'; yet according to this historian of childhood, examples of child abuse are abundant throughout history. It should not be assumed that Christianity was not part of this history. Indeed, it is time to seriously look into this dark side of the history of religious education as well – not simply for the sake of historical indictment, but for the sake of preventing abuse from repeating itself in the future.

3 Systematic perspectives

Religious education can be viewed from different perspectives, historically as well as systematically. The two most important perspectives, however, are theology on the one hand and the philosophy of education on the other. Both perspectives will be addressed in this section.

3.1 The need for religious education

3.1.1 Theological perspectives

From the perspective of Christian theology, the need for religious education is not only based on the biological fact of ever-emerging new generations or on social challenges but is rooted in the nature of the Christian faith. This faith centres on Jesus Christ and implies a relationship with him. Both aspects presuppose becoming acquainted with him, his life, his teachings, his death on the cross, and the testimonies to his resurrection. The source of all this can only be the Bible – even if in education it may not be used as a text but as a basis for suitable narratives for children. As the Christian faith is based

on a historical figure and historical events, it is of utmost importance that the process of tradition continues over time and across generations. Next to preaching, education is the most powerful means for this task. All churches and congregations, therefore, have an obligation to provide education.

While the Christian faith is revealed by the Holy Spirit, it also needs to be explained and understood. This need is reflected in Christian ecclesiology (cf. Osmer 2005). In his description of the different charisms, Paul (in Rom 12:7; 1 Cor 12:8–10) includes the charism of teaching, and in later letters of the New Testament, teaching has become an office within the church as described above (cf. Eph 4:11). In the history of the church, the teacher has remained a core image, and theology itself is the mirror image of a faith that wants to be understood, explained, and discussed.

Another connection between the Christian faith and religious education has its starting point in Jesus' special appreciation of children and his teaching that the kingdom of God belongs to them. As a consequence, the special dignity of children should play a key role in theological anthropology, not only theoretically but also practically; for example, concerning children's rights and their protection (cf. the essays in Bunge 2005a). Last but not least, children's right to religion and religious education can be considered a corollary of Christian anthropology (Schweitzer 2017).

From the perspective of the Christian faith, religious education necessarily entails ethical aspects as well. In this respect, religious education provides moral orientation both to individuals and to society at large. From the perspective of the sixteenth-century Reformers it was important that catechetical instruction would be of moral value even in respect to those who do not believe. In terms of their catechisms, especially the Ten Commandments can be thought of in this respect.

3.1.2 Perspectives from the philosophy of education

Philosophy of education entails different understandings regarding the need for religious education. Most often, the reference is to the anthropological argument, which goes back to Schleiermacher, among others (see above [2.4](#)). According to this argument, no education can be justifiably called comprehensive if it does not include the spiritual or religious dimension in general and humanity's relationship to God and transcendence in particular.

Another way of stating the need for religious education comes from the interconnection between religious education and values. Religious education is, on this view, considered important in that – and insofar as – it supports socially desirable values. Given the multicultural and multireligious character of many contemporary societies it has also been argued that religious education becomes indispensable as a source of peace

and tolerance. Such attitudes cannot develop unless they are supported by (religious) education from early on. Education for promoting peace and justice has become an indispensable task of religious education (Nipkow 2003).

Christian values education should not be reduced to social and religious adaptation but must also be taken seriously in its critical dimension of liberation and global renewal concerning, for example, ecological challenges, aggression, and war as well as oppression and economic disparities.

However, ever since Jean-Jacques Rousseau (cf. above [2.4](#)), philosophy of education has also been a source of critical objections to religious education. Some representatives of this discipline have even claimed that religion and education can never be reconciled because, in their understanding, religion is based on beliefs which have to be accepted without critical scrutiny, whereas education is based on rationality and objectivity. According to these thinkers, speaking of Christian education is a 'contradiction in terms' (Hirst 1994). However, this view of rationality and objectivity is no longer very convincing given contemporary critiques of, for example, Western understandings of reason and science.

Other educationalists, starting with Rousseau, have criticized the forms in which religious education is practiced. According to this view, as far as it follows an instructionist model it fails to do justice to children and adolescents by contradicting the insights of modern psychology. As will become clear below ([5.1](#)), however, contemporary understandings of religious education have taken such criticisms into account, at least as far as there is an attempt to be pupil-oriented and to follow the standards of modern education.

3.2 The aims and shape of religious education

Both theology and philosophy of education have developed different understandings of the aims and the shape of religious education, which will be discussed in the following. Moreover, some considerations will be given to the relationship between the two perspectives.

The first forms of religious education in the early church are often called catechetical (see above [2.2](#)). From today's perspective, they followed an instruction-oriented understanding. It was assumed that there was a direct link or continuum between teaching and learning. The aim was a transfer of content – in this case Christian doctrine. This understanding remained dominant for many centuries. It was also the framework within which the new catechisms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were used. Rote learning was the standard model, although the warning of turning young people into parrots, only repeating words without understanding their meaning, was also present even before Modernity. In the eighteenth century, German Pietism started to introduce new methods focused on

individualized teaching and learning aimed at the heart, while a few decades later with the Enlightenment, more rationalist methods gained in influence. As a result, there was a growing consensus that religious education could no longer be confined to a catechetical model but should be in line with the ideas of modern education. Education should make the individual person and the development of the self its starting point, rather than just focusing on the transmission of content. This understanding is mirrored in the new term 'religious education', as opposed to catechesis, among others exemplified by the American Religious Education Movement in early twentieth century (Osmer and Schweitzer 2003b).

Due to the influence of the philosophy of education, but also of modern theology, the demand developed that religious education must be clearly distinguished from religious socialization (for example, Hull 1984). Socialization is often understood as a process of adaptation by which young people come to adopt the dominant rules and expectations of a society or religion. The aim is not that they should attempt to change the existing culture and society but to help maintain them in their present state. Modern religious educators have opposed this view ever since Schleiermacher (cf. above [2.4](#)), arguing that education must always do justice to both aims; that is, maintaining the given social and religious order while also enabling people to improve it. This argument can also be applied to the church. This implies that religious education must be more than religious socialization and should emphasize the autonomy and the critical capacities of the individual self, without losing sight of the need for a balance between socialization and education or between continuity and change.

To this day, the relationship and balance between socialization and education has remained fragile. In the United Kingdom, the distinction between religious nurture and religious education is often taken for granted (Hull 1984; Jackson 2019). Religious nurture (in the sense of socialization) should be confined to the family and the church, while religious education at school should be truly educational, i.e. neutral and multifaith. In other countries like Germany, however, critics of this distinction have pointed out that religious traditions will lose their educational value and potential if they are only taught in a neutral manner. Only the chance to encounter religious beliefs in a challenging and, consequently, non-detached manner opens up to the possibilities of existential learning (for a description of such debates see, for example, Barnes 2020).

The relationship between religious education and moral education deserves special attention here as well. From early on in the Christian tradition, the formation of character was seen as an important aim of religious education (cf. above [2.2](#)). Even within catechesis, the Ten Commandments were given a prominent place, for theological reasons as well as for reasons of moral education. Following this integrative understanding, which also corresponds to the idea of Christian ethics as an essential part of theology, religious education must always include moral education. The fact that moral education, or 'Ethics',

has been introduced as an alternative to religious education at school in some countries (as in Germany) does not contradict such an integrative understanding. It shows, however, that non-religious forms of ethics have become influential in education as well.

In today's context of religious pluralism, with competing worldviews and interpretations of human life, many educators suggest that religious education should prepare young people for a responsible life based on considered and informed judgment concerning this pluralism. According to this perspective, religious education should not merely focus on the learner's own religious tradition. Instead, it must allow young people, at least to some degree, to familiarize themselves with the plurality of different religions from early on (Jackson 2004). Moreover, religious education should help them to develop constructive and peaceful attitudes towards the plurality of religions and worldviews. This implies, for example, that religious education must offer them criteria which can be used when dealing with competing religious truth claims.

How should religious education be related to theology and to philosophy of education? Does the academic discipline of religious education belong to theology, or does it belong to the study of education? Both points of view have been argued for in an exclusivist manner around the world and throughout history. From an exclusivist perspective, religious education must either be shaped only according to theological principles or strictly conform to educational criteria. Yet neither position is convincing. Without a clear relationship to theology, religious education tends to turn into some kind of religious studies (i.e. it will be subject to the criteria of neutrality and detachment), and without a clear relationship to the philosophy of education it loses its educational quality (i.e. it will fall back to instruction-oriented models of transferring content without paying attention to the development of the learners). Hence, a balance between both perspectives is considered necessary by many religious educators.

However, whether such a balance can be achieved depends, again, on theological assumptions and the underlying educational theory. If they are not open to each other, no balance is possible. This can be seen from notable examples. Followers of the theology of Karl Barth, for example, set forth understandings of (religious) education which are exclusively dominated by theology. Such understandings leave no space for dialogue with theories of education. Most contemporary religious educators in the United Kingdom, opposing such theological views, base their work not on theology but on a combination of religious studies and educational theories. Indeed, most religious educators in the United Kingdom (and some other countries) do not work in theological departments, but in schools of education. So long as the relationship between theology and the philosophy of education is based on dominance, a fruitful engagement is not possible.

Religious education in the United States of America is a different case. Similar to how public (state-maintained) schools in the United States do not include the subject of religious education, academic religious education is typically located in denominationally orientated seminaries. Yet both Catholic and Protestant scholars of American religious education have proposed theories which engage the philosophy of education. However, such theories do not focus on religious education at school (cf. Groome 1980; Osmer 1990).

3.3 The role of religious education within different educational contexts

While the distinction between religious nurture and religious education, and their relationship to the family or to the school, may be considered problematic (as indicated above), it is also true that religious education must be adapted to different contexts. This refers to different practical fields which will be considered in the next section, but it also concerns a number of systematic aspects and polarities.

One such polarity is between private and public: Should religious education be limited to the private sphere, or should one claim a place for it within the public sphere? This question arises mainly in countries where both the state and the public sphere are considered secular and neutral in a strict sense, due to a certain understanding of religious freedom. Yet the Christian faith entails the task of being public in the sense that it should be accessible to everyone who is interested in it, and also in the sense of Christian commitment to the common good. For these reasons, religious education should not be reduced to a mere private matter, exclusively based on the freedom of religion and not allowing for any interference with personal religious choices, including the education of one's children. Instead, and at the same time, it must be recognized that religious education is of public relevance for society at large and that, from a Christian perspective, it should be carried out in ways that do justice to its public character.

Another polarity has to do with the relationship between church and state and, as a consequence, with legal aspects. This polarity is most visible in the context of schools, which are maintained and controlled by the state in most countries. In many cases, however, religious education is offered as a subject within such schools. This leads to the question of whether the state should also have control over this subject, or if such control would conflict with state neutrality based on freedom of religion. There are competing models for the solution to this problem. Generally speaking, the tendency is that the more the state controls religious education, the more neutral this subject needs to be - a model which is followed most clearly in, for example, Sweden. Another model practiced, for example, in Austria and Germany presupposes some kind of cooperation between state

and church in order to allow for more faith-related forms of religious education, without violating the principle of religious freedom.

This debate about the preferable model of religious education as a school subject has been going on for several decades. The multifaith model developed in England and Wales has had considerable influence in many other countries. However, according to a report by the Commission on Religious Education (2018), the actual quality of religious education in UK schools ranges from generally poor to deplorable (also see Conroy et al. 2013). Non-faith related models, which exclusively aim at informing pupils about different religions in a neutral manner, have been criticized for giving a one-sided picture of the religions treated and for presupposing non-belief as the rule and norm (Kittelman Flensner 2017). Denominational models of religious education have come under pressure because of significant changes in religious demography, leading to decreased membership rates for traditional Christian churches, and due to a multireligious presence in society. Although these debates often focus on the advantages and disadvantages of the different models, while also showing some missionary zeal in favour of the model in their own place or country, it seems obvious that each model is the outcome of a particular history in a region or country, the religious situation there, and the respective legal presuppositions which also vary from country to country.

Last, but not least, there is the polarity between understanding religious education as a denominational (or confessional) task and as a form of ecumenical or even interreligious cooperation. Historically, religious education developed in close relationship to particular congregations and churches, which explains why religious education was carried out in a manner adequate from the perspective of a particular denomination (Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox). Yet, with the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century, the demands for ecumenical cooperation in the field of religious education have become stronger. Sometimes formerly separate programs (for example, for Lutherans and for Reformed groups) have been united ecumenically, while in other cases forms of cooperation below the threshold of unification have been practiced, for example, between Roman Catholics and Protestants.

With societies becoming increasingly religiously pluralistic, the demand for interreligious education and interreligious cooperation began to take hold (Engebretson et al. 2010). Accordingly, religious education's contribution to peace has become an important topic in many places. As a result, models of interreligious education and interreligious cooperation are gaining in importance. There is growing consensus among religious educators that the interreligious dimension must be included within religious education. Here too, controversies emerge regarding the best way of pursuing this task. The British multifaith model is often considered most suitable, but one may question as to whether this model really allows for faith-related encounters and for theology to take on its proper role (cf.

the debates in Barnes 2020 or Jackson 2019). Again, at least to some observers, making religious studies as opposed to theology the basis of religious education turns out to be a severe limitation.

3.4 Religious education as an academic discipline

As mentioned above, the term 'religious education' refers to a certain practice as well as to an academic discipline. In some languages, there are two words for these two meanings, though this is not the case in English. The academic discipline of religious education can be considered part of theology or, more specifically, of practical theology. It is then treated as a subdiscipline of practical theology, usually alongside homiletics, pastoral care, liturgical studies, etc. Yet, in other cases religious education is viewed as part of educational studies and is taught in educationally focused institutions. As has become clear above, both understandings are legitimate. At the same time, it seems desirable that religious education includes both theological and educational perspectives, which gives it an interdisciplinary character.

Beyond its basic task of preparing ministers and teachers, as well as other professionals, for their various fields of practice, academic religious education pursues distinctive research goals as well. In this respect, theoretical analyses concerning the rationale, shape, and aims of religious education can be mentioned in the first place. While the general outlook in religious education tends to be ecumenical, such perspectives still tend to exhibit some denominational traits (cf. Groome 1980 as a Catholic example; Osmer 1990 as a Protestant example), unless they follow a religious studies approach (Hull 1984; Jackson 2019).

However, research in religious education clearly goes beyond sheer analytical questions. It makes use of a broad range of methodologies – systematic, historical, empirical, international-comparative, evaluative – to only mention the main ones. Consequently, there is also a broad spectrum of publications. Specialized journals may be consulted for recent developments: for example, the *British Journal of Religious Education* or the *Journal of Beliefs and Values* (both from the UK but international in orientation); *Religious Education* (from the US); the *Journal of Religious Education* (originally from Australia), as well as more regional journals like the *Korean Journal of Religious Education* and the *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik und Theologie* (with articles published in German and English).

Moreover, international associations like the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV) bring together researchers from all over the world. Collaborative research and international knowledge transfer (Schweitzer and Schreiner 2021) have become important topics in religious education as well.

4 Empirical perspectives

There is broad agreement in the academic fields of religious education and practical theology that empirical research has become an indispensable contribution to their work. Without empirical data and results it would not be possible to understand the contemporary situation with its challenges for religious education. And without empirical research, it would also not be possible to evaluate the effectiveness of educational programmes. In this respect, academic religious education is closely related to psychology and sociology whose research methods have come to exert much influence in the field of religious education.

4.1 The contemporary reality of religious education

Empirically, the contemporary reality of religious education varies from place to place, and especially from one country to another. Ecclesial and national traditions alike make themselves felt in this field. In the United States of America and France, there is no religious education in public (state maintained) schools. In other countries, like England or Denmark, there are still state churches which exert considerable influence over religious education, even within state-maintained schools. Denominational differences also play a major role. The Roman Catholic Church puts emphasis on preparing children for first communion while Lutheran Churches invest much time and money into working with adolescents in the context of confirmation. Yet even within Europe, such confirmation work shows a multifaceted appearance.

Participation rates in religious education programmes vary, both over time and from country to country. An empirical study on confirmation work in nine European countries showed that there are dramatic decreases in some countries while in other countries participation rates have remained stable (Schweitzer et al. 2015). On the whole, participation rates reflect the religious demographics of the respective country. In Austria, for example, the small number of participants in educational programmes of the Protestant Church is consistent with the small proportion of Protestants in Austrian society. In Finland, to mention a quite different example, the Lutheran majority within the population is reflected in high numbers of children and adolescents participating in educational programmes offered by the Lutheran church.

In many countries there has been a strong increase in the percentage of people without any religious affiliation. Figures vary from country to country. According to the Pew Research Center (2018), the percentage of religiously unaffiliated is as low as 15% in Ireland, while higher numbers are recorded in the Netherlands with 48% and in Norway with 43%. It seems obvious that the increasing number of 'nones', as they are often referred to, changes the climate for religious education in both schools and the general public. Moreover, there is the concern of how these people could become informed about

matters of religion so that they can responsibly take part in public debates and decision making processes concerning religious issues.

According to available data, young people's experience with educational programmes – both in terms of religious education in school (cf. Jackson et al. 2007 and subsequent volumes in this series) and congregational confirmation work in some countries (Schweitzer et al. 2015) – responses are quite positive. Nevertheless, there is a strong decrease in interest in (active) church membership, typically beginning in late adolescence. Traditionally structured congregations, in particular, do not appear to be attractive to older adolescents and young adults. This is why psychological and sociological research on religion in adolescence is important and potentially helpful for religious education (for example, Fowler 1981; Smith and Denton 2005).

Empirical research can offer insights into the possibilities for churches to become more attractive to young people. It can also raise critical questions concerning theoretical assumptions. This applies to both congregational contexts and schools. For example, a multi-country study on how religious education is really taught shed serious doubt on the validity of different theoretical models for religious education at school (Ziebertz and Riegel 2009). While in theory, there is a clear distinction between teaching religion, teaching about religion, and teaching from religion, in reality teachers seem to be interested in pursuing all three intentions at the same time.

4.2 Religious development in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood

Empirical research on the religious development of children, adolescents, and (young) adults has, since its inception in the twentieth century, garnered significant attention among religious educators. Insights into the religious development of young people can be quite valuable for identifying and specifying tasks for religious education and to create a better fit between educational programmes and the needs, interests, and abilities of young people. With the increasing adoption of a lifespan approach in developmental psychology since the 1970s, it became obvious that the perspective of religious development must also be applied to (young) adulthood because, as opposed to earlier psychological views, major religious changes take place after adolescence as well. Consequently, terms like 'post-adolescence' and 'young adulthood' became increasingly influential in religious education (cf. Schweitzer 2004). Moreover, more sociologically orientated studies pointed out that early adulthood is the most likely time in life for withdrawing one's church membership or for distancing oneself from religious family traditions (see, for example, Smith et al. 2011). At the same time, however, early adulthood can also be a time of continued or renewed commitment to the church; for example, in the context of voluntary work (cf. Schweitzer et al. 2017)

One of the most well-known theories from the psychology of religion is James W. Fowler's 'Stages of Faith' (Fowler 1981). Based on cognitive-developmental (Piagetian) assumptions as well as on psychoanalytic theories, Fowler described six different forms of what he calls 'meaning making'. He considers them as different developmental stages, ranging from the faith of early childhood through various changes in later childhood and especially in adolescence to the sometimes complex forms of faith in adulthood. Although lower stages tend to occur more often at younger ages than later in life, these stages are not related to age in any fixed manner. Fowler, who considered himself a Christian theologian and educator, deemed the higher stages as more desirable in terms of fulfilling the goals of religious education. However, due to the hierarchical nature of this understanding of religious development, Fowler's theory has been considered questionable by some critics (for critical appraisals see the contribution in Osmer and Schweitzer 2003a). Moreover, while Fowler and his associates conducted hundreds of interviews, he never produced sufficient longitudinal data to support his theoretical assumptions concerning fixed sequences of religious change in individual lives. Nevertheless, Fowler's theory and comparable work done by other developmentalists have proven to be quite helpful in guiding practitioners in their work, particularly with children and adolescents.

4.3 Effects and effectiveness of religious education

Church leaders have always been concerned with the quality of religious education. Inspections in schools and parishes (ever since the Reformation) have focused on the effects and the effectiveness of respective educational programmes. Yet, it was only after the emergence of systematic methodologies for social scientific evaluations of educational programmes that the question of the effects of education could be pursued more seriously. International studies, including the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have received a fair amount of attention because, by comparing pupils' abilities or competences acquired at a certain age, they have raised critical questions concerning the effectiveness of school systems in different countries. Similar questions can be raised concerning religious education at school.

On the whole, however, empirical studies concerning the effects and effectiveness of religious education at school are still rare (for an overview, see Schweitzer and Boschki 2018). This may possibly be due to the assumption that religious education has to do with faith and that faith cannot be understood as a measurable effect of teaching. Yet beyond this general limitation, the quality and effectiveness of religious education, especially in school, can and should be evaluated. Currently, the results from such research indicate that it is in fact more difficult to actually accomplish the goals of this subject than had previously been assumed. While religious education appears to be successful in supporting knowledge acquisition, it appears to be less successful in

supporting other abilities, like understanding or perspective-taking. These results are important in that they may be used for improving religious education in the future.

One must also keep in mind, however, that faith is not the only dimension of religious education that evades empirical measurements. Teaching and learning in the area of religion are always closely related to the individual persons and interpersonal relationships, which, at least in part, go beyond empirical investigation. This is not to say that one could not or should not research empirically the process of teaching religious education. Nevertheless, one must always keep in mind the limitations necessarily connected to such attempts.

5 Practical perspectives

An overview article cannot offer detailed information concerning the practice of religious education, nor do justice to its expressions in different locations. Readers will easily find specialized literature concerning most of these fields of work by consulting the internet or respective websites of libraries and religious education institutes. Yet, some general considerations and an outline of different fields of religious education are in place, and also a few remarks concerning teaching methods, textbooks, and teaching materials.

5.1 General principles

As has become obvious from the historical account above, religious education in Christianity started out with catechetical instruction which, later on, became based on set catechisms. This kind of teaching is now viewed critically because it contradicts modern pedagogical assumptions, and ideas like pupil-orientation and child-centredness, and is also in tension with insights from the psychology of teaching and learning. These insights emphasize the value of active and self-regulated forms of learning. Thus, they do justice to insightful learning, as well as the interconnection between learning and experience. Moreover, cooperation in groups and, speaking more generally, working on tasks together with other people have proven to be more effective than traditional ways of direct instruction. This also applies to the ethical dimension. Responsibility, for example, is not acquired most effectively by telling people to be responsible but by giving children and adolescents the chance to increasingly take on more responsibility.

There is broad agreement in the field of religious education today that, independently of their location and context, programmes of religious education should be based on the principles outlined above, emphasising, child-centredness, self-determination, and cooperation. Consequently, these principles can be used as criteria for evaluating existing programmes, and for designing new programmes or educational procedures. Moreover, it is important that the educational programmes of religious educators and pastors provide an introduction to such principles and a guide for how to use them effectively.

5.2 Different fields of religious education

It is important to be aware of the breadth and variation in the field of religious education. In recent times, the distinction between informal, non-formal, and formal education has proven to be helpful in understanding this plurality (Schweitzer, Ilg and Schreiner 2019). Informal education occurs wherever and whenever individuals interact with each other and with the world in general. Such education begins right after birth (or even before birth) and continues throughout life. Most often, the family is its first location, which implies that informal education is not planned or controlled in any systematic manner. This is completely different when it comes to formal education, which is often identified with mandatory schooling. Set and controlled schedules apply in this context, together with syllabi, grading and certificates to be acquired. Church based educational programmes, as well as other programmes offered in civil society, belong to non-formal education. Participation is voluntary but the programmes are partially structured and may be coordinated by professional personnel.

Religious education needs to be adapted to the specific locations in which it takes place. At the same time, it is important to evaluate the different institutions and programmes from the perspectives of individual children, adolescents, or adults. The aim must be that each person can access the kind of religious education which fits their needs, interests, and abilities best.

Typical contexts for religious education are the family, kindergarten, educational programmes offered in the congregation (children and youth work, Sunday School, programmes aimed at preparing children and adolescents for First Communion or confirmation), religious education at school, and adult education. In the past, higher education was often seen as a suitable context for religious education as well, but the importance of this context is often overlooked today. A new and, so far, widely uncharted context for religious education is the media which – beyond its role in informal religious education – can also be used more purposefully; for example, in terms of programmes or websites in the internet as some churches or institutes of religious education have developed them.

5.3 Teaching methods, textbooks, and teaching materials

It was often assumed, and sometimes is assumed even today, that the most important question in religious education is about the methods of education and teaching. Even the academic discipline of religious education is often reduced to the task of telling people about the most effective methods for transmitting certain content.


While methods are indeed important in all teaching, theories of education take a clear stance against any isolated focus on teaching methods. Comprehensive theories of

teaching and learning have a much broader scope, and methods must be judged by their usefulness within this scope. From this perspective, the first question to ask is about what should be learned, which cannot be answered through a one sided focus on content, but only from analysing its relationship to the learners. How can specific content become meaningful to them? What may it mean for them in the future? How can they actually encounter the content in a meaningful way? Etc.

In line with the general principles described above, different forms of religious education should be educational in the sense of addressing not only a certain subject matter but the learning person as a growing self.

There is an abundance of textbooks and materials used within religious education, available in many different languages and formats. Sometimes they are produced by churches or other religious bodies, while at other times they are offered commercially. Generally speaking, all textbooks and teaching materials should be evaluated with reference to the general principles outlined above. Some are very good while others are lacking in quality and educational value.

Attributions

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