



Getting to know the ropes

Reflections on the study visits to London and Karlstad – and beyond

MARTIN FISCHER

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF TEACHER EDUCATION OF CHRISTIAN CHURCHES VIENNA/KREMS

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Exploring RE in action is, generally, a challenging task. Exploring different approaches in different countries with different preconditions and aims even more so. Thus, the purpose of these observations and deliberations is not to criticize single lessons or individual teaching efforts but to try to get a bigger picture based on the experiences of the READY study visits in London, Karlstad, and Vienna.

Speaking from the perspective of Austrian denominational RE it is probably fair to say that there are problems attached to this system, and academic studies show that the learning outcomes appear far from satisfactory.¹ Keeping this in mind it might, hopefully, help to sideline some kind of apologetic ‘othering’ (in the meaning of *our system is best and I’ll tell you why*) as much as possible. This needs to be mentioned before we embark on criticizing ‘other’ endeavours because it indicates that the envisaged learning outcomes are not directly linked to the system as such RE is taught in.

But to begin with, I would like to present a couple of flashlights from these study visits and, then, try to put them in context.

“The teacher spoke about the problem that in Sweden today it is quite difficult to say one is believing or one is Christian, normally people say that they don’t believe in God, this is what is expected; in the course of the discussion she even said: ‘It is so embarrassing to say in Sweden I am religious’. This impression was underlined in another conversation with Adam who said that in Swedish public it would be much easier to say ‘I am gay’ than to say ‘I am religious’. [...] we also heard from the students that it is very difficult in Sweden to talk about religion because the image of being religious is a very difficult one, as one student put it: to believe in God or being Christian is the same as believing in Santa Clause.”²

During more than a dozen lessons observed in London and Karlstad we only noted a couple of times that a single issue received more than five minutes of discussion time. If the schedule is *work 60 seconds on your own then 60 seconds with your partner, then 3 minutes in plenary* – I wonder if this actually is ‘discussing’ a problem. However, in England it was a striking experience to see and feel the pace of RE lessons. “Our system is very exam-driven” as one student teacher put it. Thus, RE is a subject amongst others and can be chosen for GCSE exams. Since these are given out by the state all pupils must meet the same requirements which explains why there is the constant pressure on “getting on with the lesson”. There is (at least in the lessons observed) very little room for discussions aside the requirements of the curriculum.

I was not surprised to hear an English RE teacher say something like “the bible is black and white on homosexuality”. No, it is not! However, this doesn’t seem to be a problem of a non-denominational RE system but a matter of recognizing developments in biblical

¹ Cf. RITZER Georg (2010): Interesse – Wissen – Toleranz – Sinn. Ausgewählte Kompetenzbereiche und deren Vermittlung im Religionsunterricht - eine Längsschnittstudie (Empirische Theologie 19), Wien: LIT, 371ff.

² <http://www.readyproject.eu/uploads/files/1502565174documentationKPHinKarlstadv13.7.20171.pdf> [10 May 2018] 22f.

hermeneutics and theology (and one might find probably quite a few RE teachers of any denomination in Austria who would wholeheartedly agree with the account of this English teacher). It is, by far, easier to feeding stereotypes towards religions than, actually, trying to make sense of ancient texts as relevant ones for people in the 21st century and trying to understand the spiritual and symbolic dimensions of a certain religion.

Both, England and Sweden, pioneered in the cause of a ‘non-confessional, multi-faith religious education’ over 40 years ago³ taking an approach that tried to reflect the pluralised society of the 20th century (and to undo the tight grip of a state church). Secularisation and demographic changes are enhancing all kinds of possibilities, ranging from vital religiosity and spiritual life styles to ‘atheist by habit’, ‘atheist by principle’, humanist, or agnostic world views. All this demands a different RE than that of a – allegedly – religiously homogenous past (and is taking a system like the one in Austria to its organisational limits). Both countries have taken several steps during the 20th and the early 21st century to

- a) promulgate the importance of knowledge about religion and
- b) to support the ‘neutrality’ of the state towards a specific world view.

Thus, teachers are, basically, expected to keep an equidistance towards any of the possibilities mentioned above. This demand is met in various ways. Some teachers would not divulge anything about their own opinions; others would tell students if they were asked; and others are quite happy to communicate their views – at least in a performative way wearing religious artefacts (“today I am a Christian, tomorrow a Hindu ...” – as one Swedish teacher put it).

RE, of course, is also reflecting both, the teachers’ attitudes and school cultures. We were able to observe strict, yet careful, classroom management as well as a rather wild and noisy classroom ending up in bearing resemblance to a drill ground; respectful and motivated engagement in class as well as indifferent and mere physical presence. The shared claim (i.e. knowing about religion[s]), thus, is realised in various ways reflecting school environments and their demographic situations as well as the individual abilities of teachers and – last, but not least – the different stages of children’s and adolescents’ development. All this is not new. Neither is the critical notion that denominational RE bears obvious limitations and can be questioned in its suitability for pupils in the 21st century. Yet, RE for all as learning *about*

³ Cf. CUSH Denise (2016): What Have We Learned from Four Decades of Non-Confessional Multi-Faith Religious Education in England? Policy, Curriculum and Practice in English Religious Education 1969-2013, in: BERGLUND Jenny/SHANNEIK Yafa/BOCKING Brian (Eds.): Religious Education in a Global-Local World, Springer Switzerland, 53-70.

religion(s) is raising questions regarding the implications of a Religious-Studies-approach to RE at schools.

On the ‘pro-side’ there is certainly the fact that (unlike in denominational RE)

- a) pupils are not split up into different groups but stay and learn together
- b) the main focus does not lie on ‘one’s own faith’ but is extended to a multifaceted picture of religions and world views
- c) *all* pupils learn about religion(s) not only those with a certain affiliation
- d) RE is perceived as a school subject on eye-level with others (at least with the Humanities)
- e) RE might contribute to pupils’ competence to dealing with difference in a constructive or, at least, non-pejorative, non-violent way.

All this might be included in the general aim of acquiring religious literacy. Diane L. Moore’s definition (which was adopted by the American Academy of Religion) states: “Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.”⁴ Yet, as Harvard Divinity School adds: “Critical to this definition is the importance of understanding religions and religious influences *in context* and as *inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience*. Such an understanding highlights the inadequacy of understanding religions through common means such as learning about ritual practices or exploring “what scriptures say” about topics or questions. Unfortunately, these are some of the most common approaches to learning about religion and lead to simplistic and inaccurate representations of the roles religions play in human agency and understanding.”⁵

This leads us to the ‘con-side’. Because looking back at the study visits I would consider it as a fair account that the latter aspect (contextualizing and, especially, the human experience of religion/religious influences) did not receive adequate attention. Therefore, I would like to point out three issues which seem to be of relevance when considering RE in the 21st century:

⁴ <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/definition-religious-literacy> [10 May 2018].

⁵ Ibid.

The Religious-Studies-approach, or: learning *about*; the impossibility of ‘neutrality’; and the necessity of theology in RE. As these three issues are intertwined I consider them in one go.

Religious Studies and (Christian) theology share many things: topics, methodology, concerns, amongst others. Where they differ is the usage of the term ‘religion’.⁶ Religious Studies employ a descriptive use of ‘religion’. It is all about describing how things are; what the teaching/doctrine is about; which practices can be observed; what religion ‘does’ for people. Theology, in many aspects, does a very similar thing. But in doing so it employs a normative use of ‘religion’, meaning that theology not only states ‘how things are’ but asks whether they should be like that – or not. Now this, of course, is a no-go for Religious Studies which claim an equidistance to all religions. Broadly speaking, and following a pluralistic approach, the basic assumption is that no religion can claim truth for itself. Because religion is always communicated through human experience pointing at some transcendent reality whereas empirical religions are only an effigy of this transcendent reality. Therefore, no religion can claim ‘the truth’ for itself and the claim for truth appears as a pointless quest.⁷

But apart from the epistemological problem to ‘know’ of this transcendent reality when it is, in a strict sense, incognisable – is it really pointless? I doubt it – provided one isn’t claiming the illegitimacy of any kind of religion/religious activity. Concepts like Ulrich Körtner’s “metacritical inclusivism”⁸ have shown that a Christian truth claim and dialogue with others on eye-level are not contradictions but, rather, the result of the *theological insight* that faith is based on revelation and God’s grace, not intellectual choice. The truth of a given revelation can only be perceived *within* a certain religion (here: Christianity). When Christians confess an almighty God they also must consider that God not only acts as the revealed God but also as the hidden God (cf. Isaiah 45,15) which they, by definition, cannot know of. Because *revelation* (in a strict sense) is only accessible by those who *believe* (in a strict sense) in this revelation. Therefore, Christians cannot tell if another religion is the locus of divine revelation (as this is not accessible), neither can they tell that this is not the case. For this reason, there is not only the possibility but, rather, the obligation to encounter with other religions on eye level without

⁶ Cf. KÖRTNER Ulrich H.J. (2006), *Wiederkehr der Religion? Das Christentum zwischen neuer Spiritualität und Gottvergessenheit*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 33.

⁷ See the articles by HICK John: *The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity*, and GILKEY Langdon (1992): *Plurality and Its Theological Implications*, in: HICK John/KNITTER Paul F. (eds.): *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness. Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, 16-36. 37-50; KNITTER Paul F. (1995): *One Earth – Many Religions. Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility*, New York: Orbis

⁸ KÖRTNER Ulrich H.J. (2005): *Synkretismus und Differenzwahrnehmung als Problem einer Theologie der Religionen*, in: KÖRTNER/DANZ Christian: *Theologie der Religionen. Positionen und Perspektiven evangelischer Theologie*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 57-76, 71ff.

giving up core theological elements (cf. Joh 14,6) – yet at the same time sincerely keeping in mind that this refers to a truth claim which is not drawing upon *absolute* validity.

This appears not to be lofty, mere academic theological deliberation but fundamentally important for RE:

- Firstly, because the experience to standing by one's belief/faith without being pejorative towards others is theologically crucial (cf. Mic 4,5)
- Secondly, this theological insight is fundamental for democracy education as it enables young people to deal with difference without giving in to relativism
- Thirdly, it makes clear that *tolerating* a certain belief/faith is not enough but that different beliefs need to be appreciated 'in their own right'. In history, tolerance was a huge step forward to overcome violence for religious reasons. Yet, contemporary societies need appreciation of their diversity combined with a sensitivity towards difference.

Therefore, I suggest a different approach regarding the terms 'pluralism' and 'diversity' in the context of religions and worldviews. This can be developed following the structure in the Theology of Religions: confessional RE corresponds with Exclusivism, denominational RE with Inclusivism, and the Religious Studies approach (descriptive, learning about) with Pluralism. Pluralism can be understood as acknowledging difference in a descriptive sense: plurality as a fact of life within the global village which can be described in many ways, ranging from phenomenologically to sociologically and others. The question of 'right or wrong' with regards to doctrine is pointless. Yet, with regards to the consequences of doctrine (ethics) this question cannot be answered within mere description and, thus, needs other reference points such as universal human rights or federal constitutions. By doing so, pluralism stops acknowledging difference in a mere descriptive way and brings in normativity, referring to other authorities (reference points). For instance, if a pupil in England would speak pejoratively of homosexuals (because of his/her belief) this would get into conflict with the superordinate requirement of the state that discrimination of homosexuals is a no-go. This signifies a normative claim against a certain 'religiously grounded' argument and, thus, it is not 'neutral' towards this religious claim anymore.

Diversity, in contrast, not only acknowledges difference ("empirical-analytical dimension") but appreciates it ("normative-prescriptive dimension"⁹). However, to appreciate something does

⁹ WALGENBACH Karin (2014): Heterogenität - Intersektionalität - Diversity in der Erziehungswissenschaft, Stuttgart: UTB, 93.

not mean to appreciate difference just for the sake of it. When difference comes in the guise of some ancient image of masculinity prying for women as mere objects; or corporal punishment of children based on (allegedly) religious demands – there are lines to be drawn. The question is: on what grounds can they be drawn? Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, a German expert on constitutional law, famously argued that the modern, liberal, and secular democracy draws from and is based on preconditions which it cannot guarantee by itself¹⁰; meaning, that a democratic state needs a shared ethos, some kind of community-thinking by those who live within a certain nation.¹¹ The point is that this is not a free-pass for religion(s) but, rather, an appeal for the responsibility by groups and individuals to argue this shared ethos from their points of view, respectively – religions included.

Thus, it is not about creating some civil religion, as Robert Bellah¹² suggested. But, rather, to undertake the exigent effort to argue this shared ethos responsibly. From a Christian point of view: theologically responsible. Therefore, it is necessary to bring in the normative aspect by including theological deliberation when thinking about and dealing with religious diversity. Theology cannot simply be left out. It is needed. It is asked to share its intellectual knowledge and analytical methodology when thinking about religious concepts. And: theology is understood as a certain praxis of interpreting ‘reality’;¹³ as a form of “engaged reason”.¹⁴

Again, the purpose is not dominating others but scrutinizing different religions in respect. But to be able to do this it is necessary to acquire certain abilities. Without those it is not possible to distinguish one thing from another. In other contexts, it is common standard to acknowledge different levels of development. Let me give an example: If the tenor from the church choir next door is belting out some aria by Giuseppe Verdi it is commonly acknowledged that the same aria sung by, say, Jonas Kaufmann is considered a different and yes: higher league.

¹⁰ BÖCKENFÖRDE Ernst-Wolfgang (1976): Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit. Studien zur Staatstheorie und zum Verfassungsrecht, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 60.

¹¹ „Vom Staat her gedacht, braucht die freiheitliche Ordnung ein verbindendes Ethos, eine Art „Gemeinsinn“ bei denen, die in diesem Staat leben. Die Frage ist dann: Woraus speist sich dieses Ethos, das vom Staat weder erzwungen noch hoheitlich durchgesetzt werden kann? Man kann sagen: zunächst von der gelebten Kultur. Aber was sind die Faktoren und Elemente dieser Kultur? Da sind wir dann in der Tat bei Quellen wie Christentum, Aufklärung und Humanismus. *Aber nicht automatisch bei jeder Religion.*“ (BÖCKENFÖRDE Ernst-Wolfgang [2010], Freiheit ist ansteckend, in: Frankfurter Rundschau vom 2.11.2010, 32f). The so-called ‘Böckenförde dictum’ was recently put under scrutiny in DREIER Horst (2018): Staat ohne Gott. Religion in der säkularen Moderne, München: C.H. Beck, 189-214.

¹² BELLAH Robert N. (1967): Religion in America, in: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences 96/1, 1-21.

¹³ DALFERTH Ingolf U. (2004): Evangelische Theologie als Interpretationspraxis, Leipzig: EVA.

¹⁴ KÖRTNER Ulrich H.J. (2018): Dogmatik (LETh 5), Leipzig: EVA, 10, which he uses in contrast to Charles Taylor’s “disengaged reason” (1992): Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity, Cambridge: University Press.

Similarly, this is needed when talking about religious diversity. Not many people – at least within a ‘Western society’ – would appreciate teaching pupils that the earth is a disk and, thus, aiming at going back behind well-established knowledge and, epistemologically, the Age of Enlightenment. Yet, in RE of a certain kind this appears as one option amongst others. Objection! Not every religious expression can be dealt with on the same level. There are higher levels and lower levels of reflection and coherence. *This* needs to be appreciated. And this is where theology is needed – just as much as it is necessary to involve other disciplines such as historiography, physics, psychology, sociology, or philosophy *in their respective competencies*.¹⁵ Otherwise, every religious expression would be perceived as on the same level with all others and actual learning would be made impossible. This doesn’t mean imposing a certain view on others. Going back to our example, music might be a matter of taste. One might loathe opera – be it Joe Public or Jonas Kaufmann – and rather listen to elevator music. Yet still, it is possible to share criteria which recognize the performance of the unknown and the world-star tenor. But these criteria need to be acquired – and *taught*. The same accounts for establishing and teaching theological criteria.

One last thought. Graeme Nixon said in his final reflections on Tübingen’s study visit to Aberdeen: “There is value in engagement, in personal search as we are calling it. *There is no empathetic thinking, there is no more imagination about the other. So diversity becomes separateness, and multiculturalism begins to fail, and, in fact, bad religious education will hasten that process, unless you get people thinking... what they think about diversity.*”¹⁶ And Peter Kliemann observed that the “model of Religious Education splitting children and youth into different groups according [to] their often only formal religious affiliation must seem strange, definitely when these different groups are not brought together any more for having dialogues and debates about their different faith traditions. On the other hand, we noticed, that Religious Education ‘for all’ doesn’t guarantee either that diverse world views and religious traditions are given a distinct voice. Sometimes a RE ‘for all’ might even cover and keep secret diversity.”¹⁷

¹⁵ It is a rather strange observation that people seem to be more inclined to ask a historian about the resurrection of the Christ than a theologian (cf. DALFERTH Ingolf U. [1998]: Volles Grab, leerer Glaube? Zum Streit um die Auferweckung des Gekreuzigten, in: Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche 95, 379-409). This makes you wonder if the same people would rather consult a psychologist when having a broken leg instead of a physician.

¹⁶ <http://www.readyproject.eu/uploads/files/1502565246DocumentationstudyvisittoAberdeenV20110217.pdf>, 44 (italics MF [10 May 2018]).

¹⁷ <http://www.readyproject.eu/uploads/files/1502565246DocumentationstudyvisittoAberdeenV20110217.pdf>, 60 [10 May 2018].

These two observations I would consider as crucial. To put it pointedly: In denominational RE there is a certain kind of religious homogeneity which actually considers and utilizes the diversity of the pupils (different approaches to their personal belief amongst others); whereas in ‘RE for all’ groups it seems that the diversity basically is not being addressed as this would be seen as inappropriate. Again Peter Kliemann: “The common goal of the German and the Scottish model of teaching RE should be, to become aware of diversity, to articulate diversity, to respect the differences, to see diversity of perspectives as an opportunity to enrich life.”¹⁸ If I would translate that into options to be developed I would say that the denominational model – provided it is not imploding altogether as it is coming to its organizational limits due to the ever increasing fragmentation of religious groups and the demographic changes – needs new forms of co-operation, distinctly *beyond* those already established. Whereas ‘RE for all’ (in its various forms in Scotland, England or Sweden) needs to recognize that focusing mainly on rituals and visible aspects whilst neglecting the spiritual life and symbolic dimensions of religion¹⁹ is not sufficient to teach young people the relevance of religious manifestations in people’s lives.²⁰ Having said that: RE ‘for all’ doesn’t need to be like that, but it is tempting – and *happens*.

The sociologist Christoph Kucklick addresses Graeme Nixon’s concern by using a German linguistic ambiguity: He talks of the “hochauflösende Gesellschaft”. This means, on the one hand, the ‘high definition view’ on the single individual made possible through – amongst other factors – pedagogical/social individualization, ‘out of the box thinking/living’, personalized news/ads/friends/medicine/etc (big data); and on the other hand, “auflösend” also means disintegrating. Thus, it comes down to the question what actually holds our liberal democratic highly differentiated societies together? These questions came up frequently in the READY project, for example during the discussions around British/English/Swedish values, German *Leitkultur*. The German constitutional expert Horst Dreier argues that it needs more than just some smoothly functioning administrative structures or some vague feeling of solidarity or community thinking²¹. Possibly, the answer to this question lies in the *importance of dissent*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ „Der einführend-religionskundliche Charakter des Unterrichts verführt schließlich dazu, Riten und sichtbare Elemente der Religionen in den Mittelpunkt zu rücken – und deren spirituelles Leben und symbolische Dimensionen zu vernachlässigen bzw. systematisch auszublenden.“ (SCHRÖDER Bernd [2010]: Religionsunterricht an staatlichen Schulen in Frankreich?, in: Zeitschrift für Pädagogik und Theologie 2010/2, 149-158, 154).

²⁰ To illustrate that: *learning about* music is one thing; *listening to* music, another; and *making* music a completely different cup of tea.

²¹ And certainly, we don’t need politicians who instrumentalize a certain religion *against* another one – be they Turkish, Saudi, Bavarian or Austrian!

Dissent which is settled in orderly debates and disputes. Orderly dissent instead of vague consent on ‘values’.²²

This is of enormous importance for RE. Because education at schools is a very prominent place where young people can be reached to develop personal views and to try out challenging them with their peers and teachers. But to make this a fruitful experience, *reflected* views are needed. Not tunnel vision. Not indolent indifference in the guise of tolerance. But informed, reflected and argued views²³ which can be challenged, and which can challenge others – without fear in both, a ‘safe space’ and a ‘brave space’ which RE can provide. Reflected views which can deal with difference without proselytising (in whichever direction²⁴). Reflected views which appreciate diversity instead of being indifferent to difference.

If we try to focus on this the issue of different legal frameworks for RE becomes less important. “Over and over again I was surprised, also in the wider context of the entire READY project, how quickly experienced colleagues from different European countries, with very different concepts of Religious Education and very diverse forms of teacher education, would agree on what is didactically desirable and what not. Is there beyond all theories and concepts something like a deep structure, some kind of common grammar of teaching RE, which might help us all to see regional debates and controversies in a new and also more relaxed perspective?”²⁵ We shall keep looking.

²² DREIER Horst (2018): Staat ohne Gott. Religion in der säkularen Moderne, München: C.H. Beck, 213f.

²³ Cf. WRIGHT Andrew (2008): Critical Religious Education and the National Framework for Religious Education in England and Wales, in: Religious Education, 103/5, 517-521 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080802427184>, [10 May 2018]). Wright emphatically support the idea of “deep learning” and claims that “RE in England and Wales tends to be dominated by surface descriptions of religious phenomena rather than deep exploration of contested theological truth claims”. He wants pupils to “ask questions about personal identity, values and commitments, relationships with others, the meaning and purpose of life, and ultimate truth” (519).

²⁴ It is necessary to point this out. Especially in Sweden, we observed a certain kind of reservation towards Christianity. When discussing, say, Asian religions one could hear comments like ‘interesting’ or ‘fascinating’; whereas similar things on Christianity were frequently commented with ‘I don’t know, I am not religious’. Karin Kittelmann Flensner found an even stronger stance in Swedish classrooms claiming that a “secularist discourse was hegemonic during the lessons. [...] A non-religious, atheistic position was articulated as a neutral and unbiased position in relation to the subject matter and was associated with being a rational, critically thinking person” (KITTELMANN FLENSNER Karin (2015): Religious Education in Contemporary Pluralistic Sweden, University of Gothenburg [https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/2077/40808/1/gupea_2077_40808_1.pdf, (04/09/2017)], 256).

²⁵ Peter Kliemann in his „Vignette While ‘Unpacking’ The Suitcase” (<http://www.readyproject.eu/uploads/files/1502565246DocumentationstudyvisittoAberdeenV20110217.pdf>, 61 [10/05/2018]).