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Editorial and Summary in English

by
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This Editorial is intended to make the major contents of the contributions in German known to an international readership. It is based on the supposition that such an additional overview of the journal's articles is more profitable to international English-speaking readers than just additional English abstracts at the beginning of each German article.

We appreciate any reactions and comments by readers from outside the German language context and are grateful for suggestions that can help us to further improve our journal's accessibility and attractiveness for an international readership.

(You are invited to e-mail your comments to manfred.pirner@fau.de).

***The thematic part** of this issue of "Theo-Web" deals with the German debate on the circumcision of boys in Jewish and Muslim families and is edited by our Berlin colleague Professor Rolf Schieder. The debate was triggered by a Cologne Court decision in June 2012 ruling that circumcision was physical injury. The controversial public debate led to a law that was passed by the German Bundestag (parliament) in December 2012. It explicitly allows the circumcision of boys on several conditions: It must be done 'according to the rules of medical expertise' with as little pain as possible for the child, carried out by either a physician or a professionally trained specialist, and, of course, it is the parents alone who can decide to have their child circumcised. The liveliness and fierceness of the lengthy debate made it clear that it revealed more than just a law case discussion. It showed that a large part of German society obviously is no longer willing to accept religious traditions of minority groups if they are felt to conflict with Western values. In particular it seems that the human right to freedom of religion and belief is devaluated or even denied by some as soon as it comes into tension with other human rights such as that of physical integrity. The six articles in this section of our journal explore what this means for society and especially for religious education issues. Rolf Schieder's introduction offers an informative overview and is therefore presented in this summary at full length.*

*The six contributions of the thematic issue are followed by five contributions in the section "**Research and Discourse**" that successfully passed our double-blind peer review process.*

Thematic Issue:

The circumcision debate – a challenge for religious law and religious education

Introduction to the thematic issue

by Rolf Schieder

In several respects the German circumcision debate marks a significant change. Irrespective of the law by which the legislator re-established legal certainty on 28 December 2012, the vibrations and turbulences triggered by the debate can still be felt. The unquestioned naturalness with which the religious minorities of Jews and Muslims have over centuries practised circumcision has given way to a new sensitivity for the children's right to personal integrity and self-determination. If one does not want to be reproached for treating religious minorities differently, criticism against the religious ritual of circumcision should imply putting under scrutiny religious education of children in general. A draft bill in the German Bundestag explicitly advocated this position: People should wait with circumcision until the child is mature in religious affairs. In line with this proposal, however, children's baptism would also have to be forbidden, and religious education at public schools be postponed until the pupils have reached maturity. The argument that circumcision belongs to medical law – as it has to do with physical injury – whereas baptism does not harm the child, is not really a convincing argument, because it marginalizes the psychological, social, and political implications of these rituals as well as their theological meaning.

It is important, however, to promote the sensitivity to exactly the religious perspective – which is also in the interest of inter-religious dialogue. It certainly was irritating not only for adherents of the religious minorities of the Jews and Muslims, but for all religiously musical people to take notice of comments and opinions among the German population that showed a deep resentment against religious minorities and used arguments that could easily be identified as islamophobic or anti-semitic. It was equally irritating, however, to observe how religiously unmusical people expressed their opinion that life without religion is a progress for civilization that should be fostered by the state with the help of criminal law. Secularist currents used the circumcision debate to promote their vision of a society that is cleansed from religious practices.

Since Ellen Key's bestselling book "The century of the child" (1902) the question of what adults actually do to their kids when they educate them in a religious faith has not fallen silent. Does religious education really make a valuable contribution to the development of the child's personality, or is Ellen Key right in her opinion that religious education has demoralising effects on the child? She claimed that especially the Christian religion entangles a child in a net of insoluble contradictions by confronting him with an ideal and at the same time telling him that he is not able to live up to it. What, according to Key, should be fostered in the children of the new century is not fear of hell and repentance of sins but rather faith in the strength, health and beauty of human beings. Ellen Key's hope that this would promote humanity has, as we all know, not been realised. The 20th century was full of massacres, also with children as victims. The 'political religions' have not made the world a more beautiful and better place but revealed the utter cruelty that humans are capable of.

The quarrel over whether religion has humanising or demoralising effects cannot be finally settled. Every generation will have to face it and reformulate it in their own way. In the circumcision debate it surfaces as the question of whether a child has a

right to religion. Because in the debate the focus has hitherto almost exclusively been on medical and medical-juridical issues, a well-balanced exchange of arguments over the child's right to religious education and to nurture into the religious tradition of his parents is still a desideratum. Such a discourse could well go beyond the juridical deliberations – the legal problem has been solved by the law from December 2012 that principally allows parents to have their children circumcised for religious reasons. However, while the question of legality has thus been settled, the question of legitimacy and educational appropriateness has yet to be discussed.

The contributions collected in this thematic issue are intended to pave the way for and open such a debate. To this end, it seemed necessary to first present a clear account of the present state of juridical discussion. Hans-Michael Heinig, who personally took part in the consultations on the “circumcision paragraph 1631 d”, published a first estimation right after the Bundestag approval that is re-published in this journal. The current state of discussion from a juridical perspective is summarized by Berlin criminal law specialist Martin Heger. Rolf Schieder in his contribution draws attention to the multidimensional scope of the debate that should also play a role when dealing with the topic in religious education classes. In an impressive and illuminating way Reinald Eichholz and Jürgen Thiesbonenkamp introduce their readers to those discourses that are presently of highest priority for child rights experts.

Whoever has attentively followed the publications on the circumcision debate will have noticed that a kind of separation into two major camps has taken place. Opponents of circumcision often only publish together with other opponents of circumcision, and the same goes for the proponents of circumcision. When I asked Holm Putzke – in his own words a “protagonist” of the circumcision debate – to contribute to this journal, he had to reject because of other obligations. But he answered to my question, if circumcision and baptism were comparable in an e-mail from 14 October 2013: “This topic is not in the centre of my present academic work, because baptism may touch on the right to self-determination, but it does not considerably injure a child's physical integrity. Insofar it is fundamentally different from a medically unnecessary circumcision – be it among religious minorities or not.” Obviously, Putzke does not take any interest in the religious dimension of the circumcision debate. Therefore, he keeps on speaking of the “medically unnecessary circumcision” and not of the “religious circumcision”. His medical-juridical perspective, of course, has to be respected. Yet, it seems even more important to dedicate attention to the religious dimension of the debate and its implications for religious education. This is what the readers of this journal are invited to.

Law on circumcision passed by German Bundestag (the German parliament)

by Hans Michael Heinig

This contribution was first published shortly after the law saying that circumcision of boys is not punishable had been passed by the German Bundestag. It refers to Jürgen Habermas' position in favour of the right of Muslims and Jews to practice circumcision, arguing that the universalistic idea of political enlightenment can only be realised by the fair acceptance and protection of religious and cultural minorities.

On the circumcision of boys – the legal situation since 28 Dec 2012

by Martin Heger

This contribution offers an overview of the criticism voiced against the new law on circumcision in Germany. It discusses, if this law is compatible with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Constitutional Rights of the Federal Republic of Germany. Contrary to those critics who view the new law as being unconstitutional the author advocates the position that it is constitutional and that it provides legal clarity especially for medical doctors.

The circumcision debate – a challenge for religious education

by Rolf Schieder

The ongoing debate on circumcision in Germany is seen as posing a special challenge but also implying certain chances for religious education discourse. In order to be able to take part in the debate inter-religious competence is necessary. Uncircumcised Germans should have basic knowledge about the theological frame of reference of circumcision, in particular about the character of God's covenant in Judaism. Christians should, in this debate, also take account of St. Paul's position and his teaching on the "circumcision of the heart". In addition, it is necessary to emphasize a positive perspective of the human right to freedom of religion and belief in order to protect religious minorities and further promote the acceptance of religious diversity. Eventually, the debate signifies a new sensitivity to child rights.

The circumcision of boys – a topic with more than two sides

by Reinald Eichholz

The article locates the circumcision of boys and the right to physical integrity in the context of further human rights that require a more comprehensive look at the problem. At the centre of this perspective is the fact that children are not in a position to advocate their own rights. The author makes a plea a critical discussion of the previous practice.

Child rights change the world – slowly but surely

by Jürgen Thiesbonenkamp

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has found international approval, although there still are severe violations of child rights. Aiming at the comprehensive well-being of children it demands their participation and understands them as rights holders. Wherever their lives are determined by malnutrition, bad health care, and a lack of education, this is an infringement of their rights. A new individual complaints procedure now improves the children's ability to claim their rights. The implementation of child rights requires action in diverse areas. These are demonstrated by the example of campaigns against female genital mutilation. The CRC opens up new ways for the dialogue about a tradition that is mistakenly understood as being Islamic.

Children's rights to protection of personality and to self-determination – following the circumcision debate, these rights should be newly discussed from the perspectives of ethics, religious policy, and educational policy

by Hartmut Kreß

Since 2012, triggered by a court decision of the Regional Court of Cologne, the circumcision of boys has been debated in Germany. The circumcision ritual is practised in Islam and Judaism. However, the question arises whether these religious actions that are based on traditional regulations are compatible with the child rights to self-determination and to protection of personality. Nowadays, the freedom rights of children are held in high esteem in society, in ethical discourse, and in legal policy. The areas of medicine and health care may serve as a model example of this fact. The author argues that religions – among them Christianity, too – have to catch up with taking this topic seriously.

Research and Discourse

RE teachers and their design competence – a research project

by Christine Althammer, Christina Kalloch, Eileen Richter, Christiane Rösener, and Ina Schröder

While in educational policy the decision in favour of competence-centred teaching has been made, it still remains unclear to what extent teachers will in fact adopt and support this reform. Concentrating on religious education (RE) in the German state of Lower Saxony, a research group at the University of Hannover addresses this question. As an example they focus on the development of design competence – the teachers' competence to creatively and reflectively design teaching and learning processes. Interview studies reveal that, depending on their frames of reference, teachers develop different practices. What is more, even their concepts of "design competence" are quite different as can be shown in their ways of constructing the notion in the interviews.

Ideas of God in the view of 8 to 10 year-old Protestant children

by Thomas Benesch

The article reports about an empirical study in which 31 Protestant children in Austria at the age of 8 to 10 were asked to fill in a questionnaire with mainly polarity profiles of God. The findings are not quite compatible with results of previous studies based on children's paintings or interviews: the children's idea of God does not seem to be so anthropomorphic after all. Also, gender differences appear to correlate with more modern and more traditional ideas of God. An important finding is that children can think of God as a person and as an abstract idea at the same time.

Media anthropology as a topic of religious education – findings and perspectives

By Monika E. Fuchs

The life world of today's children and youth is completely media-centred. This is why the image of man and of human education that predominate the media considerably influence young people. This influence is first analysed in five theses that take account of findings from media education and media sociology. Then, correlations with creation theology, grace theology and eschatology are explored in their significance for religious education.

Planning competence-centred RE lessons – but how?

by Matthias Hahn and Andrea Schulte

What is missing in pastor and teacher education is a practical guide on planning and giving lessons in competence-centred RE. This kind of RE is based on the fundamental competences of religious education and the characteristics of good teaching according to Hilbert Meyer. In this context, previous lesson plans that used to be interested in goals and output have to be substituted by lesson guidelines that are interested at processes and outcome. Such a guideline is put up for discussion.

“Children theology“ and every-day practice at school: an explorative study on the relationship between norms from children theology and routines in RE

by Hanna Roose

In Germany, “children theology“ has become a prominent approach to teaching RE. Its major characteristic is that children are encouraged to express their own attempts at making sense of biblical texts or theological topics in an open classroom discussion. But how suitable for every-day RE is “children theology“? Which teaching styles does the approach encounter in every-day practice at schools, and how supportive are such styles for the project of “children theology“? How do its explicit norms relate to the implicit norms of teaching routines? The article reports about an explorative empirical study that addresses these questions by analysing typical examples of teaching processes taken from RE in a 3rd grade primary school class. The analysis employs the normative perspective of “children theology“ on the one hand, and the descriptive perspective of observed practice on the other. One major result is that in the analysed lessons the pedagogical norm that pupils should be self-active becomes visible, but it seems to be largely de-coupled from the norms of subject-specific goals. For the project of “children theology“ this can be seen as a chance and a challenge at the same time.