Religious Education and Freedom of Religion and Belief

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10 Freedom of Religion and Belief in Religious Schools? Toward a Multi-perspective Theory

Abstract

In the recent disputes about religious schools in various western countries, doubts have been raised about whether such schools are able to promote the human right of freedom of religion and belief, and contribute to the common good in an ever more pluralistic society. The author advances five theses to mark basic elements of a multi-perspective theory of religious schools that tries to take pluralism and the freedom of religion and belief seriously. These theses deal with philosophical, socio-ethical, educational and legal perspectives, and lead to a theological perspective that mainly relies on the concepts of representation and translation. On this understanding, it is argued that religious schools represent a pedagogy that goes beyond the uniform and monolithic rationality that used to demand strict neutrality in public education. Moreover, transparency with regard to educational norms, and an emphasis on a communitarian perspective complementing universalistic principles, are the strengths of religious schools. In order to develop these strengths, Christian schools need to draw upon a public theology that is able to translate the language of the Christian faith into secular and educational rationalities, while still representing it as a potential that can never be fully realized.

Introduction

In various countries, religious schools have had an ambivalent image over recent years. On the one hand, religious schools seem to be very popular. In Germany, for example, over the past twenty years, a considerable number of Protestant private schools have been founded; at present – in the year 2011 – two new private Protestant high schools are being planned in Munich alone. In Britain in 2008, the first Hindu religious school was opened (Pigott, 2008). On the other hand, religious schools have been increasingly called into question. In these controversial disputes the human right of freedom of religion and belief has played a decisive role. Is it compatible with the right of freedom that religious schools require their teachers, and at least a substantial part of their student-body, to belong to a specific religion? One concrete example of this debate in Britain, one that made it to the Supreme Court in 2009, was the case of a Jewish boy who was rejected by the Orthodox Jewish JFS school in London on the ground of being not Jewish enough (Romain, 2009). The Court ruled that this was discriminatory. In May 2010, a somewhat similar case happened in Germany when a 17-year-old student was about to be expelled from a Catholic high school in Illertissen, Bavaria, because she had left the Catholic Church. After a fervent public discussion the school allowed her to stay on and finish her exam (merkur-online, 2010).

Apart from the legal problems involved, such cases easily trigger questions about whether or not religious schools are still the right schools to educate young people in an ever more pluralistic society. In 2008, for example, Britiain's biggest teacher union, the National Union of Teachers, debated a call to abolish all religious schools. Its major argument was that education which was segregated on the basis of faith, ethnicity, or social class undermined community cohesion (Daily Mail, 2008). Critical questions have also been raised by a qualitative study among graduates of an evangelical Christian school, showing that some of them felt they had not been properly prepared to face the pluralism in society (ap Siôn et al., 2007).

These examples illustrate that the issue of freedom of religion and belief in religious schools has to be seen in the wider frame of asking whether religious schools – and which kinds of religious schools – are still able to promote the development of the individual student and the common good of society in a pluralistic context. In the following, I will suggest, in the form of theses, five basic elements for a theory of religious schools that tries to take the pluralistic context and the human right of freedom of religion and belief seriously.

Thesis 1

The first thesis proposes that from a philosophical perspective, religious schools are based on the insight that rationality is not uniform but diverse.

Typically, in the English-speaking context, the philosopher Paul Hirst in the 1970s rejected the notion of 'Christian education' as a 'contradiction in terms' (Hirst, 1972, 1974: 81). Education, he argued, is a rational, critical process that can never presuppose a specific ideological truth. Obviously, Hirst for his part implicitly presupposed an incontestable universality and uniformity of rationality. He was not able, or willing, to see at that time that his own concept of rationality – and consequently his concept of education – was one that had its own axiomatic presuppositions, being predominantly informed by western enlightenment thought. Interestingly, Hirst later distanced himself from this form of 'hard rationalism' as he adopted more recent developments in philosophical thinking (Hirst, 1993; see also Astley, 1994: 41f.).[1] Perhaps the most striking aspect of this is that in almost all major currents of philosophy during the twentieth century, the idea of a uniform, universal rationality has been increasingly criticized.

1   I owe thanks to Jeff Astley for drawing my attention to Hirst's further development.

It is a merit of the assertions by postmodernists in the 1980s and 1990s that a case was made for different rationalities and a broadening of the concept of rationality itself. According to the Austrian-German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch, rationality can be defined as follows.

> 1. We speak of rationality whenever people follow a specific set of principles which determine the realm of their validity, identify their objectives, define the aims to be achieved, the methods to be followed, and the criteria to be applied. 2. These principles must be coherent with one another in order to allow coherent usage. 3. Therefore, to be rational simply means to follow the rules suggested by these principles. In doing this, we are rational in the sense of the respective version of rationality. (Welsch, 1998: 17).

Within such a framework, cultural realms such as aesthetic discourse, mythical discourse, and also religious discourse are no longer perceived as irrational or non-rational but as having their own rationality, or – to put it in the words of analytical philosophy – as having their own language games with their own grammars. This implies that there are different legitimate ways of looking at – and trying to make sense of – the world, and that each of them is a specific way of accessing the world, rooted in a specific rationality, and informed by a certain social and cultural context. As German philosopher Juergen Habermas puts it: 'There is no pure reason [...] Reason is of its nature always an incarnate reason imbedded in complexes of communicative action and in structures of the lifeworld [Lebenswelt]' (Habermas, 1987: 374).

For education, these insights make it seem problematic to try to build public education exclusively on the foundation of a uniform, universal rationality. Instead, they strengthen the view that public education from diverse perspectives, drawing on diverse rationalities, is legitimate and makes good sense. Thus, a religious perspective on education and educational theory today is likely to gain plausibility more easily than in the 1970s. For scholarship, the philosophical development particularly resulted in relativizing the ideal of 'objectivity', increasingly valuing the obligation to be explicit about the researcher's subjectivity, his or her perspectives, presuppositions and research interests. Similarly, schools and teachers should make explicit from which presuppositions their pedagogies are guided, thus

supporting students and their parents in critically assessing the education they are offered. Religious schools doing so, it seems, will be transparent as regards their educational norms and objectives, and in this way will contribute to the students' freedom of religion and belief.

Of course, we cannot neglect the question of how a common ground for communication and cohesion in an increasingly pluralistic and global society can be sustained when we give up the idea of a uniform and universal rationality. In the face of plural forms of rationality, or at least a 'variety of its voices' (Habermas, 1992), dynamic concepts of, for instance, a 'communicative rationality' (Habermas, 1984) or a 'transversal reason' (Welsch, 1995, 1998) seem helpful to theoretically address the tension between the obligation to respect different rationalities, on the one hand, and the necessity to enable communication and understanding across them on the other. Such a dynamic concept of reason also seems best to account for the fact that in the lifeworld ('Lebenswelt') manifold transversal linkings have already taken place and are continuously going on.

For religious schools, as long as they are part of public education, these deliberations imply a two-fold challenge. First, religious schools are challenged to clarify and communicate how their specific religious perspective on (public) education (connected with their religious rationality) comes about, and how it relates to more general – as well as other specific – views of education (in the sense of a transversal rationality). Second, the question is raised of how diverse rationalities find their place in religious schools and how the tension between autonomy and transversality is modelled. In concrete, this refers to the school subjects, or learning domains, the question of how these can be respected in their own right, but also be connected, in the sense of a transversal rationality, and a multidimensional notion of education. For both tasks, a theory of religious schools needs to rely on processes of theological self-clarification, which will be the content of thesis five below. But before that it seems advisable to address the issue of religious schools from more general socio-ethical, pedagogical and legal perspectives.

Thesis 2

The second thesis proposes that from a socio-ethical perspective, religious schools can be seen as emphasizing a communitarian perspective as a legitimate and meaningful complement to liberal universalism.

While in the context of postmodern philosophical discourse the idea of a uniform and universal rationality has been challenged by pointing to diverse rationalities, in the context of the practical-philosophical or socio-ethical discourse it has been challenged by a broadened concept of rationality represented prominently by communitarianism. In the dispute between communitarians and universal liberals since John Rawls' classic book *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1971), several arguments have been exchanged which are of importance for educational issues. Communitarians – probably the most prominent of them at present being Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor – criticized the individualism of classical liberal theory for an 'atomistic' view of man and pointed out that 'man is a social animal' (Taylor, 1985: 190) whose identity necessarily depends on his social relations, on personal commitments, and on communities. Whereas liberalism emphasizes the importance of abstract norms which can be reflectively endorsed by virtually all people in the world, communitarianism underlines the importance of personal social experiences for the development of values within the individual. As a conclusion of his widely read book *The Genesis of Values*, Hans Joas has by-and-large supported such a communitarian approach by pointing out that values are generated by experience – either by special, extraordinary experiences or by continuous experiences over a longer time (Joas, 2001).

It is clear that, according to the communitarian view, concrete, particular communities in which shared meanings can be experienced and communicated become substantial for an individual's identity and morality alike. While liberalism accentuates the individual's cognitive act of choice in moral issues, communitarianism argues that acts of choosing are only possible in a social context of shared meaning and shared practice in which the individual already finds himself and which guides his choosing. Of

course it suggests itself that religious communities may serve especially well to constitute such contexts of shared meaning. This is why the communitarian concept, and especially Charles Taylor's thoughts, have been widely and gratefully adopted in theological discourse.

In general, the realization seems to have spread that democratic western societies cannot be built and sustained on the basis of the rather abstract and theoretical norms of human rights and constitutional values alone, but that they need 'dense' or 'thick' forms of underpinning, substantiating and motivating these norms and values in multiple contexts of social experiences and social practice (Schoberth, 2002: 261). It can be seen in this light that John Rawls, in his book *Political Liberalism* (Rawls, 1993), has addressed some of the communitarian critique, and reduces the scope of his idea of justice to a political framework that would allow citizens with conflicting – religious or non-religious – worldviews to find an 'overlapping consensus' in major political issues with the help of a common secular language of 'public reason'. It is interesting to see how Rawls in his late essays has increasingly appreciated comprehensive worldviews such as those entertained by religious communities as a 'vital social basis' of reasonable political conceptions, 'giving them enduring strength and vigor' (Rawls, 1999: 592). However, Rawls also emphasizes that this only goes for 'rational' worldviews and religious communities that remain open to public reason and integrate basic democratic norms so as to not become sectarian and secluded.

Building on this insight, that both approaches, liberalism and communitarianism, are important and complement each other, I suggest understanding state schools and religious schools as placing their emphases differently. Because they are more pluralistic inside, state schools have a stronger emphasis on liberal universalistic principles and ideas – but yet will try to create a school ethos that can be experienced as a context of shared meaning in the school community. Because they can refer to a specific religious basis, religious schools can place a stronger emphasis on particularistic communitarian principles and ideas, and on creating a context of shared meaning. However, they will also correlate their religious perspective with the more abstract and universal principles of general

democratic values and human rights – including the right of freedom of religion and belief.

With reference to Christian schools, this means that abstract democratic and human rights and values may be underpinned, substantiated and motivated – but of course also specified, modified or even criticized – by Christian narratives, rituals and social interactions. For instance, the value of 'human dignity' will be brought together with the Judeo-Christian narrative of God creating man and woman in his image, with acts of blessing or baptism and with the social interaction of loving your neighbour as yourself because he or she, too, is God's child. In this process of 'value generalization' (Parsons, 1971: 2–3; see also Joas, 2008), and the specification of universal values, are two sides of the same coin, as will become even clearer below.

Thesis 3

The third thesis proposes that from an educational perspective, religious schools are based on the insight that education in general and school in particular are inevitably based on worldview-related premises and therefore can never be neutral.

It has been one major insight of the approaches of 'critical education' in the 1970s that 'there is no such thing as a neutral educational process' (Shaull, 2007 [orig. 1970]: 34; see also Astley, 1994: 91). Neutrality in the strict sense does not work in education, because there is no education without an implicit – or explicit – concept of what it means to be human, and what this world is all about. In other words, pedagogy is necessarily based on 'indissoluble ideological and religious premises' (Nipkow, 1998: 108), and theories of education cannot exist 'apart from an ideological and religious pluralism' (Dressler, 2006: 60). It is in line with this insight that John I'Anson in his recent article in the *British Journal of Religious Education* argued against neutrality in Religious Education and recommended to

develop a 'pedagogy – after neutrality' (I'Anson, 2010). Just as he traces the biases concerning religion in British concepts of Religious Education, one might as well uncover the 'hidden curriculum' in our schools in general in order to critically question the notion of a school that claims to be 'neutral' concerning religious or worldview related aspects. On the one hand, recent educational research, especially in the German context, has shown that educational theories and scientific approaches still carry much of an implicit 'suppressed heritage' of the western Christian tradition with it (Oelkers, 2003; Ziebertz & Schmidt, 2006; Hofmann, 2006). On the other hand, emancipation processes, both of the academic discipline of educational science and of public schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, seem to have led to rather secularistic tendencies in public school education. The analyses presented by a number of scholars in a recent German book on the relationship between religious education and other school subjects (Pirner & Schulte, 2010) reveal that, in several of these subjects, religious aspects of the curriculum topics are improperly neglected or misrepresented. For instance, one of the standard school textbook series for teaching English at German high schools comprising about 1,200 pages deals with religion only on three-quarters of a page, which is typical of other school textbooks for English, too, and corresponds with the neglect of religion on the level of teacher training (Hollm & Pirner, 2010: 75). In other subjects, such as political education and history, religions tend to be represented almost exclusively in a negative, distorting way as sources of conflict, tension and war. The problem here is not only that religious issues are misrepresented in various school subjects, it is also that teachers, textbook authors and academics *do not realize or even deny* that they have an a-religious or anti-religious attitude which influences their pedagogical theories, their teaching materials and their classroom teaching. From the US-American context, similar findings have been reported by Warren Nord (1995). In a comprehensive investigation of school textbooks for history, natural sciences and economical education from elementary school to college, he found that religion was consistently marginalized. Nord speculates that the secular views of pedagogues as well as textbook authors may be one explanation for this result, another may be the impression that

religion is a highly controversial topic from which authors and publishers tend to shy away.

From these arguments and findings, it seems advisable to demand more attention to normative questions in educational discourse and school research. In this light, religious schooling offers a special opportunity in that the schools can be more explicit in this respect. They do not, and need not, pretend to be 'neutral'. They can avoid some of the normative weaknesses and theoretical inconsistencies of a secular pedagogy and school system built on the ideal of 'neutrality'. Religious schools can and should be places where normative issues are openly discussed and thus are prevented from implicitly and secretly influencing students in the form of a 'hidden curriculum'. This again will contribute to the students' freedom of religion and belief. But is such an educational concept of religious schools compatible with the religiously neutral secular state that is in charge of public education? This is a question that belongs in the legal context and will be addressed in the next thesis.

Thesis 4

The fourth thesis proposes that from a legal perspective, religious schools can refer to the fact that the concept of 'neutrality of the state' leaves room for the integration of worldview-related values and for various forms of cooperation between state and religious communities.

The ideal of the 'religious neutrality of the state' has been hotly debated in a number of western countries over recent years. Often these discussions have had to do with religion-related conflicts in the area of public-school education, such as crucifixes in classrooms, Muslim teachers wearing headscarves, or the reference to God in the American 'Pledge of Alliance' that is recited at many American public schools in their daily morning ritual. In the following, I will concentrate on the German context with some

sideways-glances at the situation in the USA, a country with a stricter constitutional and legal separation of religion and state than Germany or Britain.

As German law professor Stefan Huster points out, one important distinction made in social-philosophical and juridical discourse is that between the state's neutrality concerning *justifications* and neutrality concerning *effects*. The former implies that actions of the state must not be justified by referring to the truth, or higher quality, of a religious faith or worldview. The state must not identify with or privilege a certain religion or worldview (Huster, 2004: 6–8). However, even very neutral-looking state legislation may in effect come in conflict with certain religious beliefs. For instance, sports education and education about sexuality at public schools are guided by educational goals which seem in no way biased by religious or worldview beliefs. Yet, conservative Muslims may have problems and regard this kind of education as incompatible with their religious values. Thus the state can only guarantee neutrality concerning justification and not neutrality concerning effects. It is not possible to establish a public order that will suit all religious and worldview groups to the same extent. However, all these groups may legitimately engage in the political dispute about the further development of public order – and they may promote the awareness that the state's neutrality is not as neutral as it appears but is, of course, based upon certain worldview and value traditions.

This is a point that has been prominent and contested in the American context as well. The discussion here concentrates on the 'Establishment Clause' of the First Amendment to the USA Constitution ('Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion ...' Amendment I, 1791). It has been argued by some that, *in effect*, constitutional liberalism has turned 'militantly secular' (Fish, 2007; see Amesbury, 2009: 204), excluding religion from the public sphere, or tolerating only a 'domesticated religion' (Hauerwas, 1991: 70) – especially in the context of public education.

Another distinction can illuminate the problem even more clearly: the distinction between positive and negative neutrality of the state. Within the legal framework of religious neutrality, the state may subscribe to a strict and complete separation of state and religion, to a 'wall of separation' in the sense of laïcité and thus enforce an exclusion of religion from

the public sphere (= negative neutrality). Or the state may aim at benevo-lently integrating the diverse religious and worldview groups into public institutions and thus seek co-operation with them (= positive neutrality). American Ethics professor Richard Amesbury speaks of two models of state neutrality: on the one hand 'strict separationism' and on the other hand an inclusive model, 'according to which all religions are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in the public sphere' (Amesbury, 2009: 205). USA Law scholar Michael McConnell calls the former view the 'secular state' model and the latter the 'religiously pluralistic state' model (Amesbury, 2009: 205). The German Constitution (the 'Grundgesetz' GG) – which does not explicitly mention the principle of religious neutrality of the state – clearly favours the latter concept, although it leaves scope for political dispute and democratic decisions to determine which way to go (Huster, 2004: 19; Weth, 1997: 424f.). This has been repeatedly underlined by the German Constitutional Court in several of its decisions on school-related issues. For instance, in their decision on the dispute about crucifixes in Bavarian classrooms – which the court criticized – the constitutional judges offered a general explication about the relationship of the state and religious or worldview related aspects. It reads:

> [The state is not obliged] in fulfillment of its educational duty, as given by the basic right to education laid down in Art. 7,1 GG, to renounce completely any references to religions or world views. Even a state that comprehensively guarantees the freedom of religion and belief and thus commits itself to religious and ideological neutrality cannot strip off all culturally transmitted and historically rooted moral beliefs and attitudes on which the cohesion of society rests and on which the fulfillment of its own duties depends. The Christian faith and the Christian churches – however their heritage may be judged today – have in this respect had an outstanding impact. The state cannot be indifferent to these intellectual traditions, experiences of meaning and codes of conduct. This goes in particular for the school, in which primarily the cultural foundations of society are handed down and renewed. Moreover, the state, which obliges parents to send their children into a public school, is allowed to take regard of those parents who wish for a religiously informed education. The Grundgesetz [the German Constitution] has acknowledged this by allowing for state-run worldview or confessional schools (in Art. 7,5), by providing for Religious Education to be an ordinary school subject (Art. 7,3) and furthermore by leaving room for active practice of religious beliefs [...]. (Bundesverfassungsgericht [Constitutional Court], 1995, translation: M. P.)

In this passage the judges base their arguments mainly on *two pillars*, which are both significant for religious schools. The first pillar, which becomes relevant toward the end of the text, is the *positive dimension of the right of freedom of religion and belief* used by those parents who wish for a religiously informed education. Religious schools as well as (confessional) Religious Education at all public schools can be perceived as a consequence of this basic human right. It reaches its limits when it infringes on its negative dimension, the right of not being forced, obliged or unwillingly subjected to religious practice or influences. It is in correspondence to this negative dimension of the right of freedom of religion and belief that the court ruled that a Bavarian state regulation demanding of public schools to have crucifixes on the walls in every classroom was unconstitutional. And it is also in line with this dimension that students can be exempted from confessional Religious Education at German public schools. In a number of court decisions as well as in scholarly dispute it has been emphasized that in principle the negative and positive freedom of religion and belief have to be balanced, and schools have to seek a way of enabling such a balance (see also de Wall, 2006). For the USA context, the counterpart or 'companion' of the Establishment Clause is the 'Free Exercise Clause', which in the second part of the first sentence in the First Amendment provides that Congress shall make no law 'prohibiting the free exercise' of religion. In consequence, Amesbury sees the public debate in the USA arrive at a conclusion similar to the above advanced view of balancing positive and negative freedom of religion: 'Neutrality cannot be achieved by excluding religious values in favor of secularist values. It is achieved only when all such points of view are afforded a hearing'. (Amesbury, 2009: 206).

The second pillar of argumentation is the distinction between, as it were, *cult* and *culture*, between *Christianity as a religion* and *Christianity as a cultural force*. It is remarkable how positively the contribution of Christianity to the foundations of the modern democratic state and to its public education is valued here by the court. However, according to the court's explication, this does not mean that the state identifies with Christianity *as a religion*; it can only acknowledge that state and society rest on the *cultural heritage* rooted in Christian traditions. Legal expert and theologian Rudolf Weth aptly argues that it is not the specifically Christian

characteristics that are in view here, but exactly those aspects of Christianity that have been generalized and have found wide approval beyond the borders of the Christian churches. Such aspects can be categorized under the notion of 'Civil Christianity' ('gesellschaftliches Christentum': Rössler, 1986) or, even wider, of 'Civil Religion' (Bellah, 1967). Of course, what is considered to belong to the realm of 'Civil Christianity' or 'Civil Religion' will be a matter of negotiation and communication within the whole of society, in which the churches are only one voice among others. There is one criticism that can be voiced against the way the argument is advanced by the Constitutional Court: the court only refers to the traditional and historical aspect of Christianity, it does not refer to the question of how compatible a religion and its specific culture currently are with the fundamental values of the democratic, human-rights-based state. However, in my opinion, this is definitely also a question toward which the state cannot be indifferent, as is mirrored in the American debate on liberal political theory. Despite controversial issues, there seems to be a wide consensus here that the state '*cannot* remain neutral' when it comes to fundamental values such as freedom and equality (Amesbury, 2009: 210); it therefore cannot retain equal distance toward religious sects that renounce or endanger these values and religions that promote them.

Religious schools, I believe, can and should be based on both pillars of argumentation. First, even as private schools, they should make every effort to find a good balance between the positive and negative dimension of the right of freedom of religion and belief. Although private religious schools have a greater degree of freedom to allow for a specific religious perspective on education, they should also respect the negative freedom of religion and belief of all their students and avoid any pressure on them to participate in religious practice as well as any attempts to manipulate them in their religious attitudes. Second, I suggest that 'Civil Christianity' can be a good starting point in the endeavours to develop a Christian profile of Christian schools and disclose the valuable heritage of Christianity to the students as well as to the teachers. Starting with 'Civil Christianity' would also be a way that combines communitarian and liberal perspectives in the above sketched-out sense. It can also be recommended to look at empirical findings as a basis on which Christian and Non-Christian teachers at

Christian schools are likely to agree (more on this below). Such a school profile will be based on Christian faith but be open to non-believers among the students and among the teachers – and in this way respect the right of freedom of religion and belief. The challenges to religious schools that have up to now been outlined mainly from an 'outsider perspective' chiefly need to be addressed from an 'insider perspective', which means from a theological perspective. This will be outlined in thesis five.

Thesis 5

The fifth thesis proposes that from a (Christian) theological perspective, the central task regarding religious schools can be described as a multi-dimensional translation within the framework of a public theology. The language game and rationality of a specific religion must be translated into educational as well as secular languages and rationalities without giving up the representation of its identity.

Public education can and should be regarded as a subject-matter of a public theology. The notion of 'public theology' that was initially introduced into theological discussion by theologians from various countries and denominations (Ronald Thiemann, Max Stackhouse, Don Browning, David Tracy in the USA; Duncan Forrester and Will Storrar in the UK; John de Gruchy and Dirkie Smit in South Africa; Wolfgang Huber and Jürgen Moltmann in Germany; see Bedford-Strohm, 2008: 344) has recently crystallized into an internationally propagated paradigm and cross-cultural network (Global Network of Public Theology, http://www.csu.edu.au/special/accc/about/gnpt/). Public theology is broadly defined as 'reflexion on questions of public relevance in the light of theological traditions' (Huber, 2008: 2; Bedford-Strohm, 2008: 345; see also Bedford-Strohm, 2009). In a wider sense, all theological contributions of socio-ethical scope can be summarized under the label of 'public theology'. Public theology's most characteristic feature is that it aims at benefitting religious persons as well as

non-religious persons and society as a whole. Public theology reacts to the rising need for orientation in modern civil societies. It acknowledges that in pluralistic western societies Christianity is no longer generally accepted as an unquestioned authority in ethical issues, yet suggests that exactly in this situation the potentials for ethical orientation from the Christian tradition should and can be voiced anew. In order to do so, public theology aims at making its interpretations of religious traditions as understandable as possible in the context of general discourse. This implies a kind of *translation* of the traditional religious language into a language that can be understood by secular people as well as by people from other religions. Public theologians need a kind of bilingual competence to communicate in the religious language game of their particular tradition, to communicate in the common secular language game of public reason and to translate between the two.[2]

Accordingly, questions of public education in general – for instance matters of social justice regarding educational opportunities – belong to the area of public theology, but also and particularly the issues of religious schools. In the realm of public education, most religious schools principally claim to benefit all students, regardless of their own religious or non-religious views, even though they may – especially as private schools – concentrate on students with a certain religious background.

In this context, processes of translation and transformation play an important role which in the following will be exemplified by reference to *Christian* schools. Christian schools claim to be guided in their educational work by Christian principles or values. In order to honour this commitment, the language game of Christian faith, with its typically Christian rationality,

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2   This also implies engaging in a constant negotiating process about the scope and substance of 'public reason'. The secular language of public reason is in no way static and permanent, but rather an alterable product of historical developments. This is why in a theological view the task cannot only be to translate religious language into the secular language of public reason but also to try to enlarge and correct such notions of public reason that seem too narrow or one-sided – as has been done by German theologians such as Johannes Fischer (2002) or Peter Dabrock (2000, 2010). See also Pirner, 2012b.

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has to be translated into educational rationality, that is, it must be shown what particular aspects of the Christian faith can mean in the field of public education. For instance, the Christian view that all humans are sinners, in the sense of imperfect and fallible human beings, may be translated into an educational concept and a school culture in which teachers and students are accepted on principle despite their mistakes and shortcomings. Such a translation may have two different meanings for the Christians and the non-Christians among the teachers at a Christian school. For the Christians it may be a way of putting their faith into practice in a specific field of their life. For the non-Christians, the anthropological view and/or the consequence drawn may be acceptable without the need for the religious principle, but is one that is compatible with their own worldviews, and thus a guide to their educational practice.

That this can happen in Christian schools is supported by empirical evidence. In a quantitative empirical study we did among the 6,000 educational staff of the 'Christliche Jugenddorfwerk' (CJD), a big Christian educational institution in Germany, it turned out that a high proportion of the non-believers among them felt that some ideas from Christian faith were helpful orientation points for them in their educational work (Pirner, 2008, 2012a). Obviously, not a few of them were able to identify with a 'Christian pedagogy' without seeing themselves as believing Christians.

These empirical findings can draw our attention to another aspect. Translation in this example is not a one-way process of theologians unfolding assertions of Christian faith in their meaning for education, but people from the CJD educational staff translated Christian principles *for themselves* into their educational thinking and practice. Such translation processes appear to be of an interactive nature. This insight is also mirrored by recent theories of translation in which translation is principally conceptualized as an intercultural and interactive process (Bachmann-Medick, 2010; Bassnett, 1990). In such interactive translation processes, it is ultimately the addressees who complete the process of translation and thus decide whether or not successful translation takes place. Moreover, it is possible for them to learn the language of Christian faith in a way that enables them to translate on their own some of its aspects into the language of educational theory and practice.

Understanding translation as an interactive and intercultural phenomenon can also mean starting with the secular (or educational) side and, consequently, seeing the Christian religion and its tradition in a new light. A good example of this is in the development of the international human rights, which only after their secular triumphal march through the centuries were recognized by the churches as being largely rooted in basic convictions of the Christian faith and therefore as being appropriate secular translations for them (Joas, 2010; Bielefeldt, 1998, 2009). In the educational field, teachers may discover that an already existing (secular) educational concept is compatible with basic Christian propositions and indeed sheds a new light on them, so that this educational concept may offer itself as an appropriate way of 'translating' those Christian propositions into educational rationality.

These examples indicate that theology, and Christianity as a whole, can profit considerably from addressing the field of public education. In a wording that I consider to be particularly fortuitous, an official paper of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) calls the area of public education a big chance for the church, because in it 'the abilities of the Christian faith within society to communicate, to promote tolerance, and to engage in dialogue are put to the test' (Kirchenamt der EKD, 2009: 61f.; translation: M. P.). This argument also points to the task that a public theology has with regard to the churches and religious communities: it should promote the understanding amongst believers that public responsibility is an integral and necessary part of the Christians' mission in this world (see, for example, Polke, 2008).

The task of theology with regard to Christian schools can now be specified as being two-fold: theology can and should, on the one hand, offer a representation of the Christian faith' in the literal sense of the word a *re-presentation*: it should keep the Christian tradition present and make it understandable in its richness and potential in the context of the present

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3   I owe thanks to my Erlangen colleague Andreas Nehring for drawing my attention to the significance of the notion of representation in the area of religious studies and theology.

world, which includes making it connectable with present thought and experience so that people can relate to it and translate it into their diverse lifeworlds – this is generally conceptualized as the core task of Systematic Theology. On the other hand, theology should engage in dialogical processes that allow it to offer translations of aspects of Christian faith into diverse other rationalities, for instance into ethical, political, or educational rationalities – this can be regarded as a specific subtask of theological (social) ethics and public theology. *Representation* and *translation* can thus be understood as the two basic assignments of theology with regard to the public sphere in general.

One further important aspect needs to be addressed in this context. In line with the argument above, the renowned agnostic philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in his impressive speech on receiving the Peace Prize of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association (Habermas, 2001), pointed out that propositions of the Christian faith can also have an important meaning for the 'religiously unmusical' like himself (p. 30). As one example among others, he refers to the biblical narrative that man was created in the image of God as one root and interpretation of the value of human dignity. What is more, he argues that through such translations from the religious language into secular languages important areas of meaning may get lost. 'Secular languages that simply eliminate what was once meant leave behind only irritation. Something was lost when sin became guilt' (p. 24). In contrast to Hegel, whose project was the assimilation of religion into philosophical thinking, Habermas aims at such a kind of secularizing translation of religion that acknowledges its exceeding potential of meaning and humanity: 'Giving due consideration to the religious origin of its moral foundations, the liberal state should consider the possibility that in the face of completely new challenges the "culture of common sense" (Hegel) may not be able to catch up with the articulation level of its own history of origins' (pp. 22–23). While with Hegel, religion can be overcome and become superfluous as soon as its valuables are all translated into secular philosophical language, Habermas clearly advocates the ongoing importance of religion in society. Following this line of argument, theology may – together with Habermas and other non-theologians – look for modes of translation that keep the 'added value' of the translated original

present in the translation, or, to put it differently, modes of translation in which the representational dimension does not entirely get lost.

To be sure, from a theological perspective the translation of Christian religion into other rationalities will always bear the risk of a self-secularization of Christianity. Already, the transformation of the living Christian religion into theological reflection has an alienating effect – religion does not equal religious rationality or theology. This goes even more for the translation of Christian religion into secular rationalities. It is true, this secularizing effect can, in principle, be theologically accepted as participating in God's incarnation into the world. And it is also true that Christian concepts such as charity can only gain general acceptance when they can be disentangled from the Christian tradition – and perhaps be reconnected to secular or other religious worldviews (a point Bielefeldt makes for human rights: Bielefeldt, 2009). Yet, what Habermas states for a secularizing translation of the Christian tradition from 'outside' also applies for an 'insider', that is, a theological perspective: In some very liberal currents of theology such translation processes seem to imply such a high degree of adjustment to the 'Zeitgeist' (the predominant trends of thinking), that they in effect almost dissolve Christian faith into ethics or a secular ideology. It is this form of translation and self-secularization that Protestant church leader Wolfgang Huber (1999), as well as Pope Benedict, have, in my opinion rightly, criticized recently.

Let us apply the distinction between different ways of translating Christian propositions to our own example from above. Non-Christian teachers, we found, may be able to relate to the Christian notion of human beings as sinners without accepting the religious background of them. They can, it seems, do so with two possible consequences. First, they may find it plausible to view all humans as imperfect and fallible and – in a Hegelian way – forget about or marginalize the religious source of this insight, especially if the school and Christian teacher colleagues do not make much effort to communicate the religious background of such views. Second, the non-Christian teachers may – in a Habermasian way – find the Christian anthropology plausible, appreciate its theological connotations and positively expect that the Christian tradition has more to offer of such valuable insights even for those who are not believing Christians.

This will probably be supported by a school culture in which the religious sources of a good school programme are explicitly communicated; the significance of the school culture in this context is supported by empirical evidence. Research among teachers at Protestant private schools in Germany indicates that on the one hand, there are indeed types of these schools of high quality, but whose teachers find it difficult to talk about religious issues and link them with educational issues. On the other hand, there are schools whose teachers communicate well about religious issues and relate them to their educational task, but sometimes in an all too simplifying or inappropriate way (Holl, 2010).

Both findings, together with the deliberations above, can be seen as stimulations to promote translation and linking processes between religious rationality and educational rationality in religious schools that do justice to either side. For this task, Christian schools need the support of a Christian theology that takes up the challenge and opportunity of representing, as well as translating, the Christian tradition into the public sphere. By doing so, it will serve the case of religious schools in a way that can be specified by adopting the well-known distinction from British religious education theory between learning religion (in the sense of religious nurture), learning about religion (in the sense of getting information and understanding) and learning from religion (in the sense of receiving personal benefits from dealing with a religion). By offering representations and translations of Christian faith, theology can help to invite people to learn more about and get personally involved in Christianity and the Christian faith (= learn religion), but also help to allow them to benefit from Christianity without giving up their own secular or different religious views (= learning from religion). This seems the best path to follow in religious schools, one which conforms with both the positive and negative dimension of the right of freedom of religion and belief.

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PART III

Empirical Perspectives