IV Vergleichende Perspektiven

British and German religious education in dialogue
A British Perspective

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In their introductory essay Michael Domsgen and Ulrike Witten have provided an informative, wide-ranging and nuanced guide to religious education in Germany; one that invites both similarities and contrasts to be drawn with British religious education. For example, there is the issue of the respective legal contexts (that of the constitution and of individual states, *Länder*, in Germany and that of parliamentary legislation in Britain) that give structure and impose form on the practice of religious education; and there is the influence of the shifting relationships between the education system, religious communities and parents, with each modifying the others, and being modified in turn, within the context of changing societies. These influences (with others) and their interaction produce significantly different »economies« of religious education. A case can be made for a straightforward comparison between both systems, say in terms of organisation, the role of the religious communities, and so on; few would deny that this could be a fruitful line of research (though an essay of much greater length than is available here would be required). From a British perspective, there is a widespread lack of knowledge about how religious education is theorised and practised in Germany; any comparative work that has been pursued has been mainly by German religious educators, Karlo Meyer (1999) and Bernd Schröder (2012), for example, are perceptive commentators on British religious education, as is Fredrich Schweitzer (2006; 2018). Nevertheless, there are numerous descriptive accounts of religious education in both countries that can be consulted (Copley 2008; Rothgangel et al. 2014), albeit lacking a comparative perspective, and it would not be particularly challenging to pursue comparisons on certain themes. For this reason this essay follows a different strategy: one that builds on a comparative approach but is more focused on identifying and analysing a relatively small number of important themes where dialogue between religious educators in Britain and in Germany could conceivably help to clarify the relevant issues, provide new insights and shape the agenda of future research.

1. The secular context of religious education

While there are differences between religious education in Britain and in Germany there are also similarities that are not merely superficial. Both countries are Western European, liberal democracies with strong historical connections between education, schools and the Christian churches, connections that have been refracted and refined, and in part annulled by events in history. Both countries have also moved from being confessional religious states to adopting a more neutral public stance toward religion. It would be possible to provide detail on the nature of the shifts in the relationship between confessional Christianity and the state in both countries, and it could be maintained that Christianity still commands a privileged religious and legal position in both, but what cannot be questioned is that both societies are shaped by the same social forces and movements that are influential across Western Europe, that of globalisation, the challenges of immigration, the rise of Green politics and identity politics, increasing religious and moral diversity, particularly ethno-cultural diversity, and what I have elsewhere referred to as individualisation (Barnes 2014: 43-47), that is, the increasing freedom for individuals to make decisions and choose identities from among a growing and complex range of options. Under the conditions of modernity (some may prefer to speak of postmodernity here) most individuals no longer are required to accept predetermined social or religious identities (the situation is more complicated with regard to minority cultural-religious groups) and instead have the freedom to make conscious choices about which religious beliefs and/or spiritual practices to endorse, if any. David Voas (2009), writing in a specifically British context, speaks of »fuzzy fidelity« to describe the way in which some individuals pick and choose from a range of religious options and identities. The same form of patchwork or extempore religion has been identified more broadly across Europe by Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1993). In her view European church members now practice »religion à la carte,« paying less and less attention to religious authorities or church pronouncements.

These developments are part of a larger narrative, or at least they can be conceptualised as part of a larger (meta)narrative, and that is the secularisation of European culture and society. Secularisation can mean different things, (following Casanova 1994) that of the differentiation of modern society into semi-autonomous secular (non-religious) spheres (a major factor in the pluralisation of lifestyles); the decline of traditional religious beliefs and practices; and that of the marginalisation of religion into a private realm, divorced from the political and public realm. Of these meanings, that of religious decline is the one most relevant to religious education, though decline also gives impetus to the marginalisation of religion in the »public square« (Carter 1994): declining religious adherents is often related to decreasing political influence. To appreciate the nature of the decline of religious belief, it is helpful to draw on Charles Taylor's study *A Secular Age*, in which he attempts to answer the question: »why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?« In 1500 »everyone believed« in God; »the presence of God seemed undeniable« as »people lived in an enchanted world« (Taylor 2007: 25). Taylor is obviously picking up Weber's concept of modernity as entailing the »disenchantment« of a premodern »enchanted« religious world where invisible forces

such as God, angels, demons, interceding saints, and a host of malevolent or beneficent powers, inhabited everyday life. Taylor (2007: 159-211; also 2009) uses the term »social imaginary« to refer to »the way ordinary people ›imagine‹ their social surroundings«. Social imaginary describes the background assumptions, sensibilities, unstated norms, and expectations which are transmitted »in images, stories, legends etc.« and »social practices« and which condition human experience, what we believe and what we do. According to Taylor we now live in a secular age, where religious unbelief (he also refers to this as »exclusive Humanism«) provides the »default position« for most people. His point is not that belief in God or religion has been shown to be epistemically deficient, say that religious belief is patently false by the canons of critical reason, it is that unbelief is the result of the influence of a secular social imaginary, which has ushered in a secular age that has gradually come to replace a former age of faith and belief. (There are exceptions to the ongoing march of secularisation and a fuller analysis of religious belief and practice in Europe would need to take account of the continuing hold religion has, particularly Islam, over minority religious communities composed of those who have emigrated from elsewhere or are the second or third generation of »immigrant« parents.)

Empirical evidence clearly shows there is a decline in support for institutional forms of Christianity and traditional models of religious identity. This decline is particularly pronounced among adolescents of school age and the younger generation. As Linda Woodhead (2016: 60) has stated, »A yawning values gap has opened between the churches and younger generations«. Scepticism about religion by many of school age may not be a new development—it has been a feature of »youth sub-culture«, certainly since the 1960s—but the percentage of »unaffiliated« or »nones«, as they are called in the sociological literature, is increasing (Lewis 2015). Often the attitude is not that of outright rejection based on argument and evidence, rather it is one of indifference: many young people are indifferent to religious beliefs and practices.[1] Clearly it cannot be assumed by religious educators that students come to school already committed to religion; equally, confessional Christian religious education, where practised, cannot be predicated on the already existing religious commitment of students, which may be formal and in name only. In many cases the diversity of religious beliefs that are present in society will be reflected in the (confessional) classroom and the idea of building on pre-existing religious commitment will need to be revised.

2. The aims of religious education

What other implications for religious education follow from the rise of religious indifference and alienation, which is mainly focused on traditional Christian belief and practice? One response in Britain, which has been voiced since research evidence of the dramatic decline of religiosity among the young became apparent, has been to call for the abandonment of compulsory religious education. For example, John White (2004), an

1 There is accumulating evidence that those who consider themselves as having »no religion« retain some level of belief in God (see Madge/Hemming 2017).

influential philosopher of education (echoing the earlier position of David Hargreaves 1994) contended that because so few students profess religious belief, it is redundant as a vehicle of moral education, and therefore compulsory religious education should be replaced with secular moral education. More recently Matthew Clayton and David Stevens (2018)[2] have argued that multi-faith religious education does little to challenge intolerance and bigotry. Their positive proposal is that religious education as a separate school subject should be abolished and the study of religion should become a (minor) component of a programme of civic, religious, ethical and moral education. These objections to religious education are not conclusive: they assume that religious education is exclusively a vehicle for some form of moral and social education. This is a truncated view of the contribution of religious education to the curriculum. Religious education pursues a range of aims, some of which are at least as important, if not more important than contributing to moral education – to provide knowledge and understanding of religions, across their various dimensions, particularly that of their beliefs, practices and historical role. Acquainting students with the nature of religion is one of the main aims of religious education, and while this aim extends to include the influence of religion on the arts, on music, drama, painting, and on material culture, it is the distinctively religious or spiritual aspects of religion that are central to its nature, and in an important sense these aspects condition all other aspects. It is what Christians believe about God and his relationship to humanity that gives meaning to Christian practice and a Christian »way of life«; it is Muslim beliefs about God, the Prophet Muhammad, the nature of revelation, and so on, that determine a Muslim way of life. We can think of this aim as concerned with developing religious literacy and enabling students to understand the nature of religion and the role it plays in people's lives and in society and internationally (Prothero 2007; Biesta et al. 2019). Religion is an important human phenomenon; and any defensible form of liberal education ought to include its study. The fact that fewer young people are religious does not undermine its educational value in schools. It should also be acknowledged that religious education does have the potential to challenge bigotry and intolerance and with familiarising students with the resources that religions provide for their character development, which include their spiritual and moral development (Barnes 2014: 218-231). For example, Christianity has a vision of »the good« both for the individual and for society; it has a historically evolving body of moral teachings; and it has made important responses to contemporary moral issues. One is not required to be a committed Christian to appreciate and to learn from the virtues that Christianity seeks to commend or the moral vision that it upholds. In addition, Christianity shares moral insights and beliefs with other religions and with secular forms of morality: religious education commends itself as the subject best suited to considering and critically reviewing the complementary and competing moral visions of different religions and secular worldviews.

2 See the reply by L. Philip Barnes (2020b).

The challenge of instrumentalising religious education

In Britain, unfortunately, we have tended to increasingly »domesticate« or »instrumentalise« the role of religion in education: religious education is important because it serves aims extrinsic to religion. For example, when the government first introduced citizenship education several prominent religious educators suggested that religious education should deliver this aspect of the curriculum and be reconfigured around the enterprise of creating good citizens; this would give renewed importance to the subject and raise its status among educators (Chater 2000). It cannot be doubted that religious commitment is frequently correlated to positive social and civic engagement, which lies at the heart of democratic society, however, the creation of »good« (as defined by the state) citizens is not the focus of most religions. Christianity focuses on God's act of revelation and redemption in Christ and the conferring of a new identity as a member of the church. Islam focuses on obedience to God, following the precepts and practices required by faithfulness to the tradition of the prophet and joining the Ummah, the Muslim community, which has priority over secular political affiliations. Religious educators need to be cognizant of the risk of conforming religious education to the ideological aims of the nation state, that is, they need to beware of religion being used to further a political or moral agenda that misrepresents religious commitments and ideals or tries to shape these in ways that ultimately subvert or secularise them. This observation has relevance to both British and German religious education.[3]

There is a further objection to reconfiguring the aims of religious education mainly or exclusively in terms of its positive contribution to society (and neglecting its role in providing the knowledge and skills to enable a proper understanding and interpretation of religious beliefs and practices); that is, its inclusion in the school curriculum becomes contingent on its ability to secure positive social ends. Should it fail in this endeavour, which is strictly external or extrinsic to religion, its position as a necessary, discrete subject in schools is undermined. A straightforward (if somewhat shallow) answer to these observations might be to insist that religious education is protected by legislation in both countries and religious educators need not take challenges to its current protected position in schools seriously; yet legislation can change, as can the interpretation and application of human rights to education. The greatest challenge to religious education both in Britain and in Germany could come from an appeal to human rights and the contention that any form of confessional religious education is inappropriate in »public« (state) schools. My view is that such an appeal should be rejected, but given the history of ideological, inconsistent and secularising judgements of the European Court

3 Interestingly, the secularisation (and instrumentalisation) of the aims of religious education is precisely the criticism that Liam Gearon has brought against the REDCo project (Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries), the European Commission's largest ever funded research initiative on religion in education (see Jackson et al. 2007). Gearon (2012: 151) contends that the *modus operandi* of REDCo is, in its own terms, oriented towards developing a European form of civil religion and thus to securing »secularising goals«.

of Human Rights such a view may be overoptimistic (Arthur 2017; Arthur/Holdsworth 2012).

3. The negative attitudes of students and weaknesses in (English) religious education

While acknowledging that student disinterest will have influence over their attitudes to religious education, there is evidence that negative attitudes also find their source in the subject itself and not only in some general antipathy toward religion. I am not qualified to speak on weaknesses in German religious education, so my comments here are confined to English (mainly non-confessional multifaith) religious education, though I intend to raise some critical issue that are equally relevant to both countries.

Empirical results

The weaknesses in British religious education may be illustrated from a range of sources. One of the largest surveys conducted into pupil attitudes and values in Britain in 2004 revealed that only 29 % found religious education interesting; only 16 % believed that religious education helped them to think about their identity; only 9 % believed that religious education helped them to live a better life; and 53 % described religious education as boring. Penny Jennings,[4] who conducted the research, concluded that »the majority of the students do not feel that religious education is relevant to their own spiritual or moral development«. More recent research presents broadly similar conclusions. A YouGov survey in 2018, showed that of 4000 students survey across the 6-15 age range only 12 % admitted to enjoying religious education a lot. In contrast, 47 % enjoyed science a lot and 31 % enjoyed history a lot. Only Citizenship polled lower than religious education, with 6 % enjoying it a lot. Clearly in Britain religious education is not a popular subject among students (Smith 2018).

In 2007 a major 3-year research project entitled »Does Religious Education Work?« was initiated by a team of educationalists, psychologists, anthropologists and philosophers from different British universities. The overall aim was to understand the particular and peculiar nature of religious education in different part of the United Kingdom, to identify the challenges facing contemporary religious education and to offer suggestions for future planning and policy. The research generated a wealth of data and results, which drew on a combination of policy work, ethnography, Delphi methods, Actor Network Theory, questionnaires, textual analysis, as well as theological and philosophical insights. The main findings were published in 2013 in a book, with the same title as the original research project (Conroy et al. 2013). By and large the results confirmed

4 Penny Jennings, Cornwall Religious Education Survey: Final Report, 2004. Originally available online, but recently removed; for summary and discussion, see Barnes 2014: 22-23.

that there are serious weakness in British religious education. Here is a sample of the findings:[5]

i) Quite a number of teachers observed in classroom situations felt uneasy talking about the transcendent aspects or »other-worldly« aspects of religions: »Steeped as many appear to be in the discourse of secular relativism«.
ii) Teacher's interpretations of the theological and doctrinal claims of a particular religion or tradition appear sometimes to have little connection to official explanations or to the interpretations and explanations upheld by those communities themselves. »Equally, some treatments of religion offered formulaic, superficial and anodyne accounts of a tradition«.
iii) Despite claims by teachers, to the contrary there was little evidence of a critical element in religious education.
iv) Many of the current attempts to justify religious education at national levels serve to facilitate »civil religion« imprinted with non-religious values.
v) There was a desire in many cases to avoid (in the name of »respect«) comparisons between religions.
vi) Frequently there are superficial accounts of religious concepts and ideas, practices and claims, that offer limited insights insight into the theological, philosophical or ethical claims of particular religious traditions.
vii) The impression is often given that there is nothing to »learn in the subject since everyone is entitled to his or her opinion«.
viii) Responses by students to the question, »Do you believe your school has helped you get along better with members of other religious groups?« showed that students in denominational (confessional) schools were »significantly more likely« to respond positively than students in »diverse schools«.
ix) Minimal evidence of the use of primary religious texts.
x) Limited attention is given to »to the linguistic and conceptual demands of the rich traditions of religious systems, and the otherness that they embody«.

These weaknesses focus on three main issues. The first issue is how faithful representations of religions in religious education are to the religions as they are affirmed and practised by »adherents« in different contexts (see i, ii. iv, vi, ix, and x). The second issue concerns the lack of serious engagement with critical issues that are relevant to the educational study of religions (see iii, v, vii). Finally, there is the issue of what students can learn from religion for their own moral and spiritual development. These weaknesses are not entirely unrelated and some development of them may reinforce the fact that they have wider relevance than that of British religious education; they also illustrate the connection between theory and practice.

5 This material is taken from my summary of the findings (see Barnes 2020a: 18-20); full references are provided.

Conceptual challenges

Every form of religious education assumes (or espouses) an interpretation of religion. For example, interpretations of religion that regard all reference to God, to the divine (the Holy, the Sacred) or to the transcendent as explicable in naturalistic terms, without recourse to anything beyond nature, clearly have implications for how the religions are represented in education and presented to students. We can think here of Émile Durkheim's (2008) interpretation of the nature of religion, which he predicated on the distinction between the sacred and the profane. For him, certain things are »sacred« because they provide a focus for community loyalty. The sacred binds individuals together to form »a moral community«; and this sense of community often brings people together for the common good. More relevantly, non-confessional religious education in Britain has until recently been dominated by phenomenological and multi-faith representations of religion that find the »essence of religion« in the Sacred and which regard the various religions as equally valid expressions of the Sacred. A convincing case can be made that it is largely as a result of commitment to a broadly phenomenological interpretation of religion (which continued when in the 1970s the term phenomenological was replaced by *multi-faith* as the appropriate designation) that has blunted the critical aspect of religious education. Under phenomenology, students were encouraged to hold their critical facilities in abeyance in order to »participate in the subjectivity of others« and to experience religious reality from/through the perspective of believers (Schools Council 1971: 22). Supporters of phenomenological and multifaith religious education, for the most part, elevated religious experience over religious beliefs and looked to experience of the Sacred as common to all religions; this common experience then became the foundation for promoting positive relationships among religious adherents and for challenging religious bigotry (Barnes 2014: 94-112). This position was given programmatic expression in the celebrated and influential British-Australian religious educator John Hull's contention that the denial of the truth of religious traditions other than one's own is the cause of bigotry and intolerance (for discussion see ibd. 126-158).

This account of developments in British religious education is necessarily brief, yet one ought to be able to see how current weaknesses relate to some of the commitments of phenomenological and multifaith religious education, as they have been interpreted and practised by British religious educators. The essence of religion was located in »private« religious experience of the Sacred, the meaning of which was divorced from religious and moral beliefs, yet potentially comprehended through an empathetic intuition. It soon became apparent to teachers, however, that the *intuitive* grasp of religious meaning was beyond the mental capacity of many students (Kay 1997). As a result, religious education became the (typically thematically) study of religious phenomena, with limited efforts made to relate these to the interests and experiences of students. Neglecting the study of religious responses to contemporary moral issues further contributed to pupil disinterest. Finally, lack of attention to critical issues about religions, for example, about their truth, their negative aspects, and so on, failed to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to respond individually to religion and to assess and evaluate contrasting religious beliefs and values; an omission that Edward Hulmes

(1979: 55) contended, as early as 1979, would encourage students' »uncertainty about the nature of religious truth« and lead them »to reject them all«.

There are clearly questions that emerge from this review of the weaknesses of British religious education that can also be asked about German religious education. What interpretations of religion are presupposed in German religious textbooks and in pupil materials? Do these interpretations faithfully reflect the nature of religion? How is Christianity represented to students and is it a representation that is faithful to what Christians believe or is it a secularised version of Christianity that facilitates non-dogmatic religion? Is the representation of religions to students compromised by political and social interests? What account should religious educators take of shifts in Christian responses to certain issues, say that of sexuality or to abortion, for example? What degree of Christianity diversity should be acknowledged in education? What importance is attached to the moral teaching of religion (Christianity) and are the topics considered those that are most relevant to students—topics such as concern for the environment, overcoming racism, the issue of crime and punishment, and so on? None of these questions admit of a straightforward answer, yet they are important.

4. Freedom of religion

Most citizens, in our modern European democracies, accept that »freedom of religion« is a fundamental right to be enjoyed by all: what exactly this means in practice can take different forms in different countries and reflection soon expands the topic into discussions of controversial social and political issues. Our concern here, however, is with the singular issue of parental rights in relation to religious education; more particularly with the right of parents (or guardians) to either exempt their child from religious education. This is the situation that currently obtains in Britain and in Germany: in some German federal states there is the right to choose an alternative subject to religious education.

In Britain parents have an historic right to withdraw their children from religious education in schools (the same right applies to collective school worship). This right of withdrawal is also known as the »conscience clause«. It was introduced on a voluntary basis in some schools in England in the early decades of the nineteenth century to protect students from receiving denominational instruction with which their parents disagreed,[6] for example, that of Anglican (Church of England) religious instruction being imposed on the children of nonconformist or »freethinking« parents. The challenge of how to accommodate students with different religious identities within the same schools became urgent as the state became involved in providing public education. The solution came in the form of legislation on religious instruction contained in the English Education Act of 1870, which stated:

> It shall not be required, as a condition of any child being admitted into or continuing in the [public elementary] school, that he shall attend or abstain from attending any

6 For historical overview, see Louden 2003 and 2004.

> Sunday school, or any place of religious worship, or that he shall attend any religious observance or any instruction in religious subjects in the school or elsewhere, from which observance or instruction he may be withdrawn by his parent, or that he shall, if withdrawn by his parent, attend the school on any day exclusively set apart for religious observance by the religious body to which his parent belongs ….

Like Britain, parents in Germany have the right to withdraw their child from religious education; and from the age of 14 students have the right to decide for themselves, unlike Britain, where the decision remains that of parents throughout the years of schooling. This system of exemption seems straightforward enough, yet there are challenges. In an increasing number of federal states provision is made for »non-confessional« (those not »denominationally identified«) students and those who have opted out of religious education, perhaps to study an alternative subject (when available) usually focused on Ethics (*Ethikunterricht*, »Ethics Teaching/Education«). This raises some concerns: Does a failure to study religion disadvantage students educationally? Students in Germany live in a country strongly influenced by Christian ideas and values, where religious diversity is increasing. Is providing religious literacy not a necessary aim of a liberal education and how is this achieved for students who do not receive religious education? There is also the issue of how religion is represented in Ethics Education, as some reference to religion will usually be made.

Juridical challenges

The issue of parental rights regarding religious education in Germany education has already become a legal issue. Johanna Appel-Irrgang and her parents, Kerstin Appel and Ronald Irrgang (German citizens) objected to the modification of the Berlin School Act which, with effect from August 2006, made attendance at ethics classes in schools compulsory for Grade 7 to 10 students.[7] Their objection was to the secular nature of the ethics curriculum, which they regarded as antithetical to their Protestant religion. Following unsuccessful attempts at the domestic level to have Johanna withdrawn from the subject, her parents brought a case before the European Court of Human Rights, invoking both Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) (see ECHR 2021) and Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 (the right of parents to ensure education in conformity with their religious convictions) (see ECHR 2015). In its ruling, the European Court of Human Rights maintained that determining schools' curriculum fell within the competency of the state, which must ascertain that it does not propagate any ideologies that fail to acknowledge parents' or guardians' religious and philosophical convictions. It further noted that under the relevant sections of the Berlin School Act, the course on ethics was aimed at examining fundamental issues in ethics, regardless of students' cultural, ethnic and religious identities and affiliations. The course therefore was believed to conform to the requirement of pluralism and objectivity articulated in Article 2 of Protocol No. 1. On the issue of the conflict of

7 European Court of Human Rights, Communiqué du Greffier Décision Appel-Irrgang c. Allemagne (requête no 45216/07), 2009.

the ethics course with their Protestant religion, the European Court of Human Rights stressed its neutrality. The final ruling (in 2009) was that the Berlin authorities, by virtue of introducing a compulsory course on ethics, had not violated rights articulated in Article 2 of Protocol No. 1, and therefore was not under any obligation to exempt school children from the course. To this end, the applicants' claims were without warrant. This and other rulings have initiated a continuing debate on »objectivity and neutrality« with regard to the role and representation of religion in education and in schools, which extends beyond the issues relevant to curriculum religious education, and although they deserve comment, their discussion is not possible in this context.

A right of exemption

This section will be concluded by returning to the English situation, where recently there have been influential calls for the parental right of exemption from religious education to be abrogated. The two most common reasons cited for this is that much religious education provides neutral and objective representations of religions (therefore there is no need for legal exemption) and that (neutral) religious education achieves desirable social and political ends (*teloi*), not (believed to be) otherwise accessible – non-confessional religious education, without the possibility of withdrawal, represents »the best and earliest chance of breaking down ignorance and developing individuals who will be receptive of the other?« (Butler-Sloss 2015) Neither of these reasons is convincing. The idea that there are neutral and objective representations of religion in education is for many no longer philosophically credible; such claims reflect an Enlightenment view of disinterested reason that has been overtaken by more postmodern or post-liberal acknowledgements of the tradition conditioned nature of rationality. Every representation of religion, of necessity, has a particular perspective on religion: there are no neutral representations of religion, for all involve prejudice (*Vorurteil*, following Gadamer), in some sense. Not all educational representations will be acceptable to everyone in a liberal society that protects freedom of religion and conscience; and it is for parents to decide what is acceptable and whether to avail of »public« religious education or not. The existence of a right of withdrawal, even if rarely exercised, also serves a useful purpose in protecting the right of parents from paternalistic educators and from the state exercising a disproportionate influence over the religious upbringing of children.

The further contention that compulsory religious education is the sole means of achieving certain social, civic or political goals in education is open to empirical and conceptual objections. A case would need to be made that students who receive religious education are necessarily better citizens than those who do not receive religious education (using the expression »better citizens« as connotating the broader set of positive goals referred to above). There is little or no convincing results from empirical research that supports this contention: those who are withdrawn from religious education are as likely to become good citizens as those who pursue curricular religious education. In addition, even if evidence showed that those who do not receive religious education invariably become »bad« citizens, this does not provide a compelling case for compulsory religious education for all. This is because there may be good reasons for allowing exemptions despite the negative personal and social consequences. Consider the social

cost of divorce and the emotional stress and reduced educational achievement of children of divorced parents (generally); yet his does not justify the withdrawing the legality of divorce. This may be an unconvincing example, but there are numerous other examples where society accepts that it is »right« for individuals to make decisions that will limit or negate their positive contribution to society. Individual freedoms have priority over (negative) social consequences.[8] In the German case, it would be interesting to know if there is comparative data between the attitudes and values and also the level of subject satisfaction between those students who receive religious education and those who receive teaching on ethics.

5. Confessional religious education

The theme of confessional religious education is often the focus of debate among religious educators. For critics, confessional religious education is the relic of a former religious age when the churches dominated European societies, enjoying political, social, financial and educational privileges; what remains of Christian influence in education needs to be removed in order to make way for a more pluralist, »objective«, non-confessional form of religious education, one committed to inclusion and respect for others, values, critics allege that are impossible to realise under confessional education. The terms used to describe non-confessional religious education are often intended to underline its educational advantages and to disparage confessional education. On occasions binary distinctions are employed to accentuate the difference: »integrative«, rather than »separative« confessional religious education (Wanda 2010), »open« rather than »closed«, »educational« rather than »indoctrinatory«, and »secular« rather than »religious« (Hull 2003). It would be interesting, if space permitted, to explore each of these oppositions critically, and to identify the rhetorical and ideological forces at work, as well as the rational force of the constructed oppositions. For example, is non-confessional religious education necessarily »open« and »educational« and confessional religious education always indoctrinatory?

The equation of Christian confessionalism with indoctrination has a long history in English religious education and can be traced back to *Working Paper 36: Religious education in the secondary school*, which was produced under the direction of Ninian Smart. *Working Paper 36* tersely states that the confessional and (what it terms) »dogmatic« approach to religious education »begins with the assumption that the aim of religious education is intellectual and cultic indoctrination« (Scools Council 1971: 21): no evidence or argument is given to support this equation. Definitions of indoctrination are notoriously controversial and contested. Terence Copley claims that »indoctrination occurs when a person is given one view of the world in such a way that they cannot see any other« (Copley 2008: 25). Does indoctrination refer to a certain method of teaching (method criterion) or has indoctrination to do with what is taught (content-criterion)? Perhaps it has to do with intention or with consequences (intention criterion and consequences-

8 The parental right of withdrawal in British education is fully discussed in Barnes 2020a: 139-163.

criterion).[9] A consideration of any of these interpretations inevitably moves quickly to include discussion of other contested concepts, such as the nature of rationality, autonomy as an aim of education, and even troublesome philosophical accounts of the nature of knowledge, whether epistemic particularism or epistemic methodism: in this case whether we can correctly identify particular instances of indoctrination and proceed on this basis to determine what the criteria for indoctrination are or whether we can identify the criteria for indoctrination independently of examining any particular instance of indoctrination (methodism).

The danger of indoctrination in confessional religious education (or in faith schools) is greatly exaggerated and although such fears are still voiced, they typically find their origin and justification in what went on in schools fifty to sixty years ago. The conclusion that confessional religious education is indoctrinatory requires that there is a necessary connection between confessionalism and indoctrination. The connection must be necessary, for if it is not necessary, that is, if there is only a contingent relationship between confessionalism and indoctrination, then some forms of confessional religious education are compatible with the process of education. This would mean that indoctrinatory confessional religious education, if and where it exists, could and should be replaced by genuinely educational, confessional religious education. Furthermore, indoctrination is only effective in a closed or uniform society in which the institutions of the state, the media, public representatives and the educated classes are all committed to the same set of beliefs and values; and where contrary voices are stifled and silenced by legal, social and political means. Indoctrination works only in a »totalitarian« context. Students today are exposed to diversity of beliefs, opinions and lifestyles on a daily basis. One only has to turn on the radio or television, access the internet or social media, observe the behaviour and lifestyle of others to recognise the ubiquity of diversity in most of our modern European liberal democracies. In such pluralist contexts it is virtually impossible to indoctrinate, in the sense of getting young people to subscribe to beliefs and behaviour without (from their perspective giving) informed or reasonable assent. In any case, efforts to religiously indoctrinate are self-defeating, for most religions, and certainly Christianity, require freely given assent to be given.

The matter of indoctrination has traditionally been discussed in the context of church schools or of confessional religious education, but in a number of writings, the English religious educator, Terence Copley (2005) advanced the view that Christian confessionalism in English schools has largely been replaced (since the 1970s) by *secular* confessionalism (even in church schools), whereby students are inducted into secular beliefs and values, and that both Christian and secular confessionalism in schools can become indoctrinatory. He gives examples from observed religious education lessons that illustrate how familiar religious material such as the story of Joseph, the story of David and Goliath and the Parable of the Prodigal Son are divested of their original religious meaning and significance and reinterpreted to serve moral and social education: ›Be faithful to yourself; ›Stand up to bullies‹; and ›Always forgive‹. Religious beliefs and the religious context of the stories are overlooked and used to inculcate universal

9 See Astley (1994: 44-77) for a clear and philosophically sophisticated discussion of these issues; see also Barnes (2020a: 152-157).

moral platitudes, yet the lessons purport to provide *religious* education. The challenge for confessional religious education in Germany is to ensure that it remains faithful to Christian teaching and values: if the voice of the churches in education becomes indistinguishable from the secular voice of the surrounding society, it becomes difficult to justify its involvement. Is it an exercise in preserving social and political influence rather than serving the gospel?

It is pertinent at this stage to refer again to the »Does Religious Education Work?« research project. Responses by students to the question, »Do you believe your school has helped you get along better with members of other religious groups?« indicated that those in denominational confessional schools were »significantly more likely« to respond positively than students in »diverse [community] schools« (Conroy et al. 2013: 208). More recent empirical research in English schools, conducted by Helen Everett (2018: 250), concluded that »no differences were found in the attitudes of tolerance between the faith and non-faith school students if categorised in this dichotomous fashion«. These findings complement other research findings that challenge the assumption that »faith schools« and confessional religious education foster student intolerance of those with whom they differ religiously. The belief that faith schools encourage intolerance and bigotry and that non-faith schools and non-confessional religious education challenge both while developing respect for others, in all probability, derives from a prejudice against the role of the churches in education, that is »typically based on unsubstantiated assumptions, and little empirical evidence« (ibd.). Research findings reveal a much more complex picture that identifies gender and personality type as the most important attitudinal determinants (ibd.: 250-252). These findings underline the importance of empirical research, both quantitative and qualitative, for religious educators and raise the issue of how relevant empirical research is not always assigned the significance it deserves because it questions »received« or fashionable traditions in religious education.

Up to this point it has been assumed that what is meant by confessional religious education is univocal, as having only one meaning. It is this assumption by critics that often lies behind the binary (dichotomous) distinction between it and non-confessional religious education. In schools, however, confessional religious education can take different forms. The distinction between confessional and non-confessional religious education is not absolute. It would be better to regard the terms confessional and non-confessional as ends of a continuum rather than as discrete categories, with different versions of each becoming virtually indistinguishable as one moves from both poles to the centre of the continuum. The extreme pole of confessionalism might include the integration of religious worship into classroom religious education or the content might be confined to one religion or critical questioning might be excluded, and so on. At the other pole might be political or secular forms of religious education that deny the truth of religion. Nevertheless, all forms of religious education, to be educationally credible, need to relate to the experience of students, and given the increasingly critical attitude of young people to religion, this probably entails a narrowing of the distinction between confessional and non-confessional religious education: in the former case this would seem to require, among other things, knowledge and understanding of the nature of religious diversity and acquaintance with objections to religion. No form of religious

education is impartial and neutral; all forms have their epistemic, religious and social commitments and all forms have strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, the form of religious education that is appropriate in one place may not be appropriate elsewhere: context is important.

Conclusion

This essay has focused on a number of common themes that are relevant to religious educators in Britain and in Germany. The intention has been to identify and clarify the issues that arise in considering these themes in a British context, and to invite German religious educators to reflect upon their responses to the same themes. The same critical issues arise in both countries, albeit with different emphases and applications, and these are likely to remain central to continuing debates: the role of the churches in education and in schools; how to plan good empirical research projects and integrate their findings into classroom practice; the form of confessional religious education appropriate to students in liberal democratic societies; the implications of human rights legislation for religious education; and the contribution of religious education to the curriculum, including its contribution to the moral and spiritual development of students, and its role in challenging intolerance and developing respect for others. Clearly the context of religious education differs in both countries and it would be presumptuous to think that common strategies and practices are appropriate for both, yet there is much that British and German religious educators can learn from each other as they meet the same challenges.

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