

Preface

Bernhard Grümme and Manfred L. Pirner

Recent comparative research on diverse forms and concepts of Religious Education in schools within a particular country and across different countries (e.g. Berglund et al., 2023; Rothgangel et al., 2016–2020; Schweitzer & Schreiner, 2020) underlines the insight that there are fundamental questions and challenges that they have in common, despite aspects that make them each distinctive. Some of these common questions are: What justification and rationale can be given for the presence of a school subject called “Religious Education” (or similar) in increasingly pluralistic and secular societies? In what way can such a school subject relate to the role of religion(s) in such societies—a role which is increasingly questioned? How can specific religious traditions be made accessible, understandable and beneficial for all pupils, irrespective of their own beliefs or nonbelief? How can RE promote substantial tolerance and understanding of different worldviews among pupils? To what extent and in what way can RE help pupils address major challenges in their lives and in our crisis-ridden time?

Being aware of such inter-contextual questions and challenges, but also of the rich diversity of (contextual) approaches and discussions that have been developed to address them, can motivate international exchange and knowledge transfer in the field of RE. Our major motivation for publishing this book in English is to make it accessible to an international readership. It contains a collection of topical and influential approaches to RE, developed by scholars in Germany. This volume was originally published in German in 2023 (as “Religionsunterricht weiterdenken”), marking the 10th anniversary of the successful book series “Innovative Religious Pedagogy” (Religionspädagogik innovativ) published by Kohlhammer and marking the 55th volume in the series.

In their recent SWOT analysis of “internationalization as a dimension of academic communication in religious education”, Benjamin Ahme and Henrik Simojoki (2024) have shown that, on the one hand, the high productivity of German RE-related research and discourse is significantly disproportionate to the low number of corresponding publications in English and that, on the other hand, contributions in English by German authors have tended not to find much international attention to date. One of several reasons for this may be the specific denominational or “confessional” grounding of the standard model of German RE. However, apart from the fact that new co-operative models of RE have emerged in recent years, it is our impression that the German standard model of RE has often been misunderstood as representing a conservative, outdated form of ‘religious nurture’. We firmly believe that the contributions collected in this volume document that, on the contrary, present German

RE is—as enshrined in the German Constitution (“Basic Law”)—based on the human right to freedom of religion and belief. It thus respects and promotes pupils’ freedom to find their own stances towards diverse faiths and aims to equip young people with the necessary competences to navigate their own way to a good life, including their share of the common good.

These are the main objectives of RE to which the contributions collected in this volume are committed and in the spirit of which they endeavour to make RE even better. They do this at the level of conceptual perspectives, which means that they offer approaches, underpinned by theory and to some extent also empirically tested, that seek to support teachers and teacher educators in justifying and arguing for RE and in planning, analysing, critically engaging and practically designing high-quality RE.

The aim of this volume is not to describe such approaches from an external perspective. Rather, the chapters allow major representatives of these approaches to have their say. The book is also intended to serve as a workbook that should have a clear focus on concrete teaching processes and be reasonably easy to read, especially for student teachers and teachers. For this reason, the authors were asked to adhere to a template and to write their texts not for academic colleagues, as is usually the case, but for student teachers, trainee teachers and teachers in school practice. The character of the workbook is also reflected in the standard structure of the contributions.

Each chapter begins with five “Theses” that can serve as a concise introduction into the chapter – which is the reason why we have not included separate introductions into the chapters in this preface. In the section entitled “Perspectives”, the approach in question is developed in more detail with reference to the theses, before the “Practice” section illustrates its relevance by using examples. The sections “Suggestions for Further Work” and “Recommended Further Reading” are intended to support in-depth engagement with the texts and approaches in seminars or training sessions. Each contribution includes a list of references.

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