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RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Summary

When thinking of alternatives for denominational religious teaching, it always includes answering the question about the relating discipline. In this contribution, the question is which theological horizon justifies the established type of denominational teaching as practised in Germany, and which theological justifications for alternative concepts of teaching are involved. In addition, it is also necessary to investigate the actual importance of distinctions between types of teaching and explanatory contexts in practice, that is, in the minds of teachers.

1. Introduction

In the German educational system, religious teaching is denominational under the strong participation of the Roman Catholic- and the Evangelical churches. Although the contents of this religious teaching is no longer called ‘catechetics’, there is no doubt about it, that an important objective is still the introduction of adolescents into the tradition of the Christian faith. Until 1990, between 80 - 90 percent of the population in the ‘Country of the Reformation’ could still be divided into half ‘Protestant’ and half ‘Roman Catholic’. Since the reunification of Germany, this picture has changed. In former East Germany, only 20 percent of the population is Evangelical, merely 4 percent is Roman Catholic, and other religions play a minor part.

Against this background there are strong demands for opening denominational education ‘interdenominationally’ or even ‘interreligiously’ (cf. Lott 1992). First of all, it would be a great shortcoming, if the large majority of non-denominational pupils in former East Germany (circa 80 percent) was not to come in contact with questions about religion, but on top of that, the rest of Germany has also been confronted with the problem of pupils, which gradually bring along less previous religious experience.

Technical and didactical teaching problems are the least difficulties, when looking for alternatives for the established religious teaching. It is even likely that they could be overcome most easily. With regard to an interreligious
opening of religious teaching, it is far more important in what way the fundamental theological issues can be solved, which are connected with a meeting between religions. For instance: How should one adequately deal with the claims to the truth by the religions? What role does the Christian faith play, when, parallel to it, the other religions are discussed. Is the Christian faith the 'religio vera', from whose perspective the other religions are looked upon? Yet, would not such an attitude be an insult to the other religions, which nevertheless represent their own claim to the truth, which is more than Christians from a Christian perspective can say about it? Does this not inevitable mean, that only the model of 'comparative' religious teaching can be considered, in which the religions are placed next to one another as objectively as possible, or a phenomenological basis corresponding with the direction which the 'Lancaster school' has taken under the influence of Ninian Smart? However: There have been objections to these concepts as well. In several instances, Grimmitt has criticised a teaching which objectifies and finally neutralizes religion (cf. Grimmitt 1987; 1987a; 1992). According to him, this teaching lacks the essential purpose of occupying oneself with religion, namely to study the truth, which the religions embody at the core, and to feel attracted to it.

In the following, I do not intend to make a personal normative contribution, by stating what — in view of the set of problems — the basis to a solution should be. There is not just one solution, because it depends on a number of predecisions, on the concessions one is prepared to make and on those one is not prepared to make. It is important to have this discussion take place. For that purpose, it can be useful for a moment to 'separate' the normative parts of this discussion from one another and to subject them to an analytical examination.

I shall attempt to do so, by first formulating a typology of models of teaching, which can be distinguished from one another in the discussion about religious teaching. I shall enter into the conceptualization and, in a first empirical round of analysis, ask whether this typology can be validated.

Secondly, I shall undertake an attempt similar to the one with the theological models, for a meeting between religions, which can be found in theological literature. I shall enter into the conceptualization and inquire again about the empirical validity.

Thirdly, I shall introduce both concept ranges in a joint empirical analysis, in which I intend to restrict myself to the connection between types of teaching and theological patterns of thought.