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The Relevance of Religion in the Public Sphere – Religion and Migration in Educational Systems

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Current Social and Educational Situation in Germany

Schools in German immigration society must struggle with a lot of challenges. About one third of the refugees are school-age children and youth. At least 300,000 of them have entered the German educational system. Every third child has a migration biography and teachers are often hardly prepared to deal with these conditions.[1]

Many of the refugee and displaced children and youth come from Arabic countries. They bring along their Muslim religion and culture into a secular society formerly moulded by Christianity. This situation requires a lot of special accommodations. Besides language barriers and being mindful of their traumatic experiences, teachers need to be sensitive in particular with intercultural and interreligious conflict situations.

According to the survey "Teacher Training in an Immigrant Society" 2016[2], it is expected that they provide individual aid to the increasing number of young refugees and children who need assistance. The expectations are high, but the teachers receive very little support.

The authors of the study, the Mercator Institute at Cologne University and the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration, asserts that despite the normal case of diversity in classrooms, apprenticeship and in-service learning concepts for teachers are not modified accordingly. The survey revealed that deficits are evident in teacher education in German states and the lacks are responsible for this situation.

The following scenario experienced by teacher Susanne S. shed a bright light on these circumstances:

It happens quite unexpected: Lisa, ten years old was jumping into the classroom and shouted: "All refugees are camel herders! They're all wogs! I hate Allah!"

Susanne S., a veteran teacher of 35 years at this school, was stunned. "I really didn't know how to react. I was overwhelmed and at a loss."

For several years her school is a member of the network 'School without Racism' and the parents and the wider public appreciate this school for promoting tolerance and openness. This is the reason why the racial slurs of the ten-year-old girl blindsided Susanne S. extremely. She was deeply affected by Lisa's outburst and the consequential tearful reaction of a Syrian schoolgirl in class community. Immediately after speaking about this in class she tried to address Lisa's

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[1] http://www.spiegel.de/lebenundlernen/schule/lehrer-sind-auf-kinder-mit-auslaendischen-wurzeln-miserabel-vorbereitet-a-1110988.html

[2] https://www.stiftung-mercator.de/media/downloads/3_Publikationen/SVR_Mercator_Institut_Policy_Brief_Lehrerbildung_September_2016.pdf

behaviour with her parents – without success. First the parents refused any contact, later they hurled accusations at her, questioned her competence and then denied any truth regarding the incident with Lisa.

When analyzing this scene, some key points should be highlighted:

- Obviously, Lisa's statements are not based on her own perception or her experiences. From a social and developmental psychological perspective there is an influence of her social environment.[3] She absorbed the racial attitudes of her parents and her parents absorbed them from their own social context.

- -Lisa's announcements are indicative of the attitudes of the German society towards migrants and these implications are connected to migration, culture and religion.[4]

- Her prejudice attributes refugees or migrants as backwards people and lowly tribes. Her abusive language is characteristic of xenophobia according to negative attitudes towards the otherness of people: culture, tradition, religion, world view, social position, language etc. This includes stereotyping and processes of othering.[5]

- Lisa's last statement points out a position of Islamophobia, which is found in current politics and fostered by social media. This includes a refusal of Islam as a religion and an open hostility towards Muslims, including the compulsion to harm them, to fight or to destroy them.[6]

- What are the possible causes of these negative sentiments shared by the social environment?

- The current political climate in Germany is influenced not only by politicizing the media but also by mediating politics and promoting negative positions about Immigration, Islam and Muslims in Germany. For years, the Islam debate has been an ongoing issue in Germany.[7] In 2010 the former German Federal President Christian Wulff created sustained

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[3] Lazaridis, Gabriella/Campani, Giovanna (Ed.) (2017): Understanding the Populist Shift. Othering in a Europe in Crisis, Routledge New York/Abingdon; Wells, Karen (2018): Childhood Studies. Making young Subjects, Cambridge UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press

[4] Meier-Braun, K.H/Weber, R. (Hg.) (2017): Deutschland Einwanderungsland. Begriffe- Fakten – Kontroversen, Kohlhammer Stuttgart

[5] Lazaridis, Gabriella/Campani, Giovanna (Ed.) (2017): Understanding the Populist Shift. Othering in a Europe in Crisis, Routledge New York/Abingdon

[6] Renon, James/Gidley, Ben (2017): Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe. A shared Story?, London UK Palgrave Macmillan; Long, Kenneth J. (2017): Contemporary anti-Muslim Politics. Aggressions and Exclusions, Lanham Lexington Books

[7] The discussion about Islam in Germany historically is rooted in the collective memory of the Europeans, e.g. when the Turks camped before Vienna and the Ottoman Empire threatened Europe and was finally defeated.

awareness with his declaration at the 20th anniversary of German unity: "Islam is a part of German society!" Public outcry and a lot of objections followed in the next years.[8]

On March 16th, 2018 the new Minister of the Interior Horst Seehofer clarified: "Islam is not a part of German society. Germany is shaped by Christianity."[9] The new Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder substantiated this statement: "Muslims living here in Germany and integrating themselves into the German Society belong to Germany. But regarding social and cultural history, Islam doesn't pertain to Germany."[10] In her government declaration on March 21st, 2018, Angela Merkel confirmed: "Islam is part of German society. The German government is responsible for strengthening social solidarity and cohesion."[11]

Consequently, this public debate about Islam and its implications in Germany significantly influences the education system in Germany.[12]

The Increasing Complexity at School in an Immigrant Society

Schools are challenged to incorporate different contexts of migration, culture and religion in order to distinguish the connections and intersections in conflict situations. There is a need to ameliorate differentiated views on ideologies, stereotypes and prejudices to support migrant children and their families in terms of education and integration. This is also vital for the students and their families from the host country, in terms of living in a multicultural society and its potentials.[13] Regarding Islam in Germany, the most important topics to consider for the educational systems can be formulated in the following:

- Religion can be an individual and collective resource in the process of integration[14]. It is an essential reference point for migrant families and their children. Migrants' religious communities can support the individual's relationship and provide a network in the host

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[8] http://www.zeit.de/2015/09/christian-wullf-angela-merkel-islam-deutschland/komplettansicht

[9] http://www.zeit.de/news/2018-03/15/seehofer-islam-gehoert-nicht-zu-deutschland-180316-99-503064

[10] https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/heute/soeder-zu-islamdebatte-100.html

[11] https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/regierungserklaerung-merkel-debatte-101.html

[12] At the same time, it is the question in which way and with intention the term 'Christianity' is used and what is meant with 'Islam'. The nexus between culture, ideology, religion must be clarified.

[13] Cole, Mike (Ed.) (2018): Education, Equality and Human Rights. Issues of Gender, 'Race', Sexuality, Disability and Social Class, Abingdon/Oxon/New York Routledge

[14] Hirschman, Charles (2004): The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States, In: *International Migration Review* 38.3, 1206-1233; Ebaugh, Helen Rose/Janet Saltzman Chafetz (2000): Structural Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations, In: *Sociology of Religion 61.2,* 135-153

country.[15] Schools, developing local educational landscapes, can build strong connections with religious communities to strengthen interreligious alliance.

– In the migration process, religion can be considered a risk because of radicalization and isolation. As many migrants in Germany are Muslim, pressing questions about religious pluralization in Germany or Western societies, especially regarding Islam, demand consideration.[16] Religious Education at school can support the development of religious opportunities and resources in a democratic society. These interreligious and intercultural capacities can be acquired in schools, which should provide space, time and learning culture for interreligious discussions.[17]

– But European host countries appear as mostly secularized societies in which religiousness is private and people are uncertain towards religious questions in the public sphere. This is also evident in the research field of intercultural pedagogy. The specific relationship between religion and migration is still largely unexplored.[18] In contrast, current surveys indicate that many representatives and teachers in support of refugees and migration avoid religious topics and feel incompetent when dealing with religiousness.

– Against this background, increased anti-Semitism among migrant children and young people in Germany is one of the emerging challenges for teachers and the educational system.[19] How to deal with this historical, political, cultural and religious topic involved in questions of migration and religion is a significant task for building respect and tolerance in German schools.

Specific Understanding of 'Bildung' in the German Context

[15] Nagel, Alexander-Keneth (Hg.) (2013): Diesseits der Parallelgesellschaft. Neuere Studien zu religiösen Migrantengemeinden in Deutschland, Bielefeld transcript

[16] Krech, Volkhard (2008): Religion und Zuwanderung. Die politische Dimension religiöser Vielfalt, In: Religiöse Vielfalt in Nordrhein-Westfalen, Hg. Markus Hero, Volkhard Krech/Helmut Zander, Schöningh Paderborn

[17] Schweitzer, Friedrich/Boschki, Reinhold (Ed.) (2018): Researching Religious Education. Classroom Processes and Outcomes, Waxmann Verlag Münster/New York

[18] Auernheimer, Georg (2016[8]): Einführung in die Interkulturelle Pädagogik, WBG Darmstadt; Holzbrecher, Alfred/Over, Ulf (2015): Handbuch Interkulturelle Schulentwicklung, Weinheim/Basel

[19] https://www.rbb24.de/politik/beitrag/2018/03/vorwurf-antisemitismus-schule-berlin-tempelhof.html

These circumstances challenge the German educational concept. What kinds of accommodations are necessary? What kind of professional skills are needed? In which way do they correspond with the German culture of Bildung?

Bildung refers to the German tradition of self-cultivation, wherein philosophy and education is tantamount to the process of both personal and cultural maturation. This maturation is described as the harmony of the individual's mind and heart, and in a unification of selfhood and identity within the challenges of a broader society.

Bildung does not simply accept the socio-political status quo, but rather it includes the ability to engage in a critique of one's society, and to ultimately challenge the society to actualize its own highest ideals.[20]

The basic functions of school education in a democratic society, which includes the significance of religious education, can be formulated as: Bildung is a critical category of social development. It is meant as empowerment to self-determination and solidarity which incorporates cognitive, ethical, aesthetic, religious and practical dimensions.[21] Bildungsprozesse provide both: scientific information and orientational knowledge. They are based on the idea that education offers a space for emancipatory and political processes which is reflected in the general school curriculum including religious education.[22]

The concept of Bildung is at the core of the influential tradition of educational thought. A key issue is the relationship between Bildung and interculturality. Drawing on Wilhelm von Humboldt and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the so-called transformative learning theory, Bildung can be interpreted as a process of transforming one's meaning perspective in encounters with others. A meaning perspective is a set of largely implicit presuppositions underlying one's habitual ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Confrontation with alternative perspectives can be an opportunity to become aware of one's own perspective, to critically assess it and to transform it. Thus conceived, Bildung is closely related to interculturality and interreligiosity.

This leads to the question what kind of relevance religion can have in the public sphere of schools.

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[20] Klafki, Wolfgang (2007[6]): Neue Studien zur Bildungstheorie und Didaktik. Zeitgemäße Allgemeinbildung und kritisch-konstruktive Didaktik, Beltz Verlag Weinheim
[21] Euler, Peter (2003): Bildung als kritische Kategorie, in: Zeitschrift für Pädagogik, Jhg. 48/Heft 3, 413–421
[22] Baumert, Jürgen (2002): Deutschland im internationalen Bildungsvergleich, in: Killius, Nelson et al (Hg.): Die Zukunft der Bildung, Suhrkamp Verlag Frankfurt/Main,106f

Significance of Religion in the Public Sphere[23] at Schools

Public Schools in Germany can be seen as a microcosm of society, in which religious and cultural pluralism is perceptible. The need for sensitivity of cultural and religious topics, and its political and historical implications at schools as part of the Public Sphere,[24] is obvious. Based on the German educational comprehension and the understanding of religious education, the question about the significance of religion in the Public Sphere of schools arises.

Social-philosophical approaches ask whether and to what extent religion is a source of value orientation and common good for democratic societies and institutions. Is it possible to achieve a so-called overlapping consensus between different religious and world-view communities? Rawls explains that an overlapping consensus on principles of justice can occur despite "considerable differences in citizens' conceptions of justice.[25] What does this mean for the religious and world-view communities to agree to freedom, equality and human rights from their own perspective? In what manner could these circumstances be meaningful for educational processes at schools?

According to Charles Taylor, these considerations should be focused on common values like community spirit, charity and solidarity, which can be identified e.g. in Christianity, Islam and Judaism. These guaranteed rights correspond with an obligation that individuals have to give back to the communities in which they live. At school, children and young people can learn how to take responsibility for these commitments. Taylor argues that religious and worldview communities could support democratic societies in building politics of recognition. He believes these cultural and social institutions, through Multiculturalism, should be engaging in a dialogue within the Public Sphere.[26]

This leads to the question of the sustainable benefits religion provides for the public sphere at schools. Some significant aspects should be pointed out:

- Schools as social spaces could be understood as 'contact zones', in which different cultures and religions meet, clash and grapple with each other. Mary Louise Pratt uses the term 'contact zone' to discuss the classroom space in terms of discussing power and oppression,

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[23] Compare the different definitions of Public Sphere by Arendt (The Human Condition 1958) and Habermas (The Public Sphere 1964) and also the critique by Nancy Fraser about the social conditions of access to the Public Sphere.

[24] In Germany every child with its own biography and life experiences must go to a public school. In this sense schools can be understood as a public sphere to which everybody has access.

[25] Rawls, John (1993 [2005]): Political Liberalism, Columbia Press NY

[26] Taylor, Charles (1992): Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition", Princeton University Press

but also finding new possibilities. "All the students in the class had the experiences...of having their cultures discussed and objectified in ways that horrified them." But in between "there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom—the joys of the contact zone".[27]

- In conversations about Islam but also Judaism and other religions, it is important to negotiate common values at schools. Religious Education as a subject at school provides such opportunities: "RE offers a space like no other: for encounter, explanation, and empathy; for expression, interpretation, and imagination; for interrogation, questioning, and reflection. It protects a space that equips students to interrogate, negotiate, and dialogue with conflicting interpretations within a particular faith tradition. It facilitates encounters between faith traditions. It takes properly into account suspicions of, hostility to, and resentments of religious traditions."[28]

- Schools in an immigrant society should provide space for intercultural and interreligious learning. In contrast to the US context,[29] European countries offer religious education as a subject at school. Legal framework for Religious Education regarding 'Bildung' is incorporated to allow discussion about orientation of life and certainties from the perspective of religion. On the other hand, there is the necessity to consider religious convictions and to deal with religious fundamentalism and extremism[30]together with processes of radicalization.[31]

- In the context of Religious Education, it is important to introduce into the public theological considerations of 'inter-hope', 'inter-hospitality', 'inter-human' and living together with a sense of transparency and sensitivity of other faiths.[32] Public debates about migration, culture and religion could be developed and complemented at schools.

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[27] Pratt, Mary Louise (1991): Arts of the Contact Zones, Profession, 33–40
[28] Sullivan, John (2017): A Space like no other, in: Shanahan, Mary (Ed.): Does Religious Education Matter?, Routledge London/New York, 7
[29]There are a lot of reasons why the situation is different in the US compared to Europe: "In addition to polarization along political and religious spectrum, there is a conflating of spiritualty with religion, a lack of education about children's spirituality, overinterpretation of the First Amendment and case law surrounding it, fear of litigation, as well as simple public relations concern for parental and local community response." In: Trousdale, Ann (2014): Pluralism and Polarity. Spirituality and Education in the United States, in: Watson, Jacqueline/De Souza, Marian/Trousdale, Ann: Global Perspectives on Spirituality and Education, Routledge New York/London, 244
[30]Whitlock, Adam (2018): The Role of Religious Education in Addressing Extremism, in: Castelli, Mike/Chater, Mark: We need to Talk about Religious Education. Manifest for the Future of RE, Jessica Kingsley Publisher London/Philadelphia, 185–200
[31] Khosrokhavar, Farhad (2014): Radicalisation, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'homme, Paris
[32] Cf. Graham, Elaine (2013): Between a Rock and a Hard Place. Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age, SCM Press UK

Questions for discussion

- What are the responsibilities in democratic societies due to religious diversity at schools?
- Can schools be understood as a kind of Public Sphere?
- In which ways is Religious Education "a space like no other"? Could it be a kind of Third Space (Homi Bhabha)?

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