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## **Biography and Religion of RE-Teachers**

### **Results of an empirical study**

#### *Abstract:*

*Religious education in schools is one of the prevailing modes in which a society's memory and consciousness of a Christian heritage is transformed. RE teachers are therefore agents of cultural tradition and change: how they handle the balance between transmission and transformation of the Christian culture in the modern society will be of great importance.*

*The interest of the empirical study was to clarify the relationship between the religious self-conception of RE teachers and their personal goals of religious education. A sample of 17 biographical interviews was interpreted by means of a structural hermeneutic method, case analysis and case comparison. Results came out on three levels: 1) Patterns of how teachers make sense from religion in their biography were found in three different types. (2) Patterns of teaching religion were spread out in a four-factor-field: Religion is regarded more or less a) as a system of doctrines, b) as a system of ethical guidelines, c) as a matter of language and c) as a space of experiences. (3) The modes of distancing between the biographical or "lived" religion and the concepts of "taught" religion vary from identification to complete separation.*

### **1. Background and context: The frame of the empirical study**

The study I am referring to has been conducted in 1998-1999 and was published in German in 2000 (Feige/Dressler/Lukatis/Schoell 2000). An additional publication refers to the analysis and evaluation of the qualitative data (Dressler/Feige/Schoell 2004). As a member of the researcher-group my contributions were interviews, case studies and an evaluation focussing on gender issues.

*The collaboration in a research group with leading persons from different institutions is not that easy but fascinating: Andreas Feige (University of Braunschweig), project leader, is one of the important empirical researchers in sociology of religion. Bernhard Dressler, at that time director of the Religionspädagogisches Institut Loccum, an in-service and development institution on religious education, Wolfgang Lukatis is known for his*

*empirical research on pastoral theology, and Albrecht Schoell from Comenius-Institut in Muenster is an expert in structural hermeneutics and qualitative research design. Albrecht Schoell, a colleague of mine, was responsible for the design of the qualitative part of the study to which I was associated.*

In modern (western) societies the public influence of the Christian churches is decreasing. Religion tends to become a private subject and takes place in a wide variety of different forms, individualised or plural patterns. Religious education in schools is one of the prevailing modes in which a society's memory and consciousness of a Christian heritage is transformed. RE teachers are agents of change: how they handle the balance between transmission and transformation of the Christian culture in the modern society will be of great importance. There is not much knowledge about whether the teachers are aware of this aspect of their role and *how* they are developing transformation processes in their minds and actions.

The major interest of the study was to clarify the relationship between the religious self-conception of RE teachers and their personal goals of religious education.

Religion in Germany is an "ordinary subject" of schooling, guaranteed by constitution. The content of the subject is based on agreements between churches and state. The participation of students is voluntary. This constitutional construction makes RE in schools to an institution with it's own right. The "doublebind" of a content relationship between school and church is up to the responsibility of the teacher: to which extent is he/she interpreting his role from the perspective as a member of the church or a professional of the school? There is no other school subject involving such a close institutional co-ordination.

The public debate in Germany sometimes gives notion to a mistrust of RE-teachers: they are considered not to have an appropriate relationship to church religion; their critical position towards church is suspected to contribute to an increasing secularisation. Thus the relationship of RE-teachers to church was questioned. Some of the authors had observed a certain shift in styles of personal piety of teachers: the elder generation preferring a critical intellectual attitude towards religion, the younger preferring an emotional and ritualised spirituality. The generative change in religious attitudes could mean a shift in pedagogical preferences: from discursive talk *about* religion and its moral implications to the opening of a *within* perspective by means of an expressive – aesthetic access to religion.

Theses hypotheses had to be tested.

## **2. Major research questions**

As stated before the attention of the study was primarily focused on three aspects:

- (1) What is the status of a RE-teacher's biographically developed religious practice (Lebenspraxis)- the "lived religion" – from the perspective of their professional self?

- (2) In which manners do RE-teachers decide about goals, content, didactics, methods of their lesson plans – their concepts of the “taught religion”?
- (3) How can the relationship between “lived” and “taught” religion be described and analysed?

In a modern society the biography of a person is a pattern of life style or life conduct (Lebensführung) which is the result of a process of autonomous decisions in different situations. The chosen options of one’s life process are accessible to the subject via reflection. Bourdieu named the patterns of life conduct with the term ‘habitus’. It is a system of internal dispositions of a subject, expressed by schemes of awareness, thinking, and evaluation. The patterns / dispositions of the habitus are not occurring by chance or only in the unique subject, but they have been generated from experiences in the society, to which patterns of sense a subject is referring, more or less consciously. These hidden patterns of what makes sense can be re-constructed by the method of structural (or objective) hermeneutic. Thus the analysis of a single biography or individual story is not only “one single case”, but searching for the structure of meaning behind gives the single case a certain relevance to the general, which is included in it.

### **3. Research methods**

The study consists of two parts: A questionnaire inquiry of more than 2.000 protestant RE teachers in Lower Saxony (out of about 10.000), and an interview study with 17 teachers.

The questionnaire has been developed by Andreas Feige in close co-operation with the staff of the Religionspädagogisches Institut Loccum, to include the expert knowledge of pedagogues, theologians, and teacher-educators. The analysis of quantitative data gives access to the numerical distribution of distinguishing features in the population.

The qualitative interview study can make use of a variety of relationships between certain characteristics, generating theoretical explanations by reasoning and interpretation.

Both parts of the study came to comparable results:

For example: the assumption of a shift from teaching *about* to teaching *within* religion turned out not to be a matter of age or sex of the teachers, but a matter of the age of their pupils. Teachers in basic education (Grundschule) were more concerned with expressive, aesthetic, spiritual and ritual concepts of religion in schools. The qualitative study could give reasons *why* it was so and how it worked.

Having been involved in the qualitative part of the study, I continue reporting on that.

The qualitative study was not merely piloting the questionnaire but a methodological structured attempt to generate theory. The process in short is like this:

- Narrative biographical interviews with a sample of 23 teachers from different schools. The interviewers made use of the same checklist, covering how the person became a teacher of RE, and what the characteristics of teaching religion were. The

narrative approach meant to give initiative and decisions about what came into mind and memory to the interviewed person.

- The interviews (about 60 to 90 minutes) were recorded and afterwards transcribed. The transcription included every single word, utterance, pause, interruption or laughter.
- In a group of three or four interpreters the text becomes the material for a “turn-by-turn” analysis: The interpreters produce as many as possible variations of “reading” a short sequence of the text, maybe one word, a sentence, a paragraph. These possible meanings serve as hypotheses to be held or excluded from the next turn or the following sequences. One has to argue very carefully until a certain structure of meaning comes out. This structure of meaning lies behind the words and sentences. It is the individual structure of how the person makes sense of her experiences, memories, feelings, impressions etc., not always obvious to herself, but activated in the situation of the interview and reconstructed by the interpreters. One member of the group then elaborates the turn-by-turn interpretation into a written text which ends with the structural hypothesis.
- Not until now the whole text will be categorised to follow the life history and the different content subjects of professional concern.
- After this another (expanded) group of interpreters comes together to re-examine the structural hypothesis and to compare it with the text of the whole interview. Whenever a passage seems to be different, contradictory, or broadening the scope, it has to be analysed turn-by-turn again. The interpretation is recorded.
- Finally one of the interpreters, the author, writes the “case-analysis” by making use of the records. Mostly the written case analysis has a volume of 30 to 40 pages. A summary in the end is a short version of the case-study. It is a matter of economy not to publish the case-analysis in full length but only the summaries.<sup>1</sup>
- When all the 17 case analyses have been finished, the group of interpreters comes together again in order to work on the comparison of the cases. Based on the written material the group generates theoretical insights by contrasting the cases. According to the general questions of the study focus was put (a) on the different types or patterns of biographical reconstruction of religion, (b) on patterns of the didactic preferences, and (c) on the modes of relationship between biographical and educational religion.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Typical patterns of religion in biographies**

We asked for the role religion – in the interpretation of the persons themselves – plays in their personal lives. Searching for patterns by which the own “lived” religion gives sense to biographical reflection we could find three different types.

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<sup>1</sup> The follow-up publication (2004) with different (categorised) re-analyses of the case-studies contains the full-length texts on an attached CD-ROM, which makes it easier to follow and criticise the ‘logic’ of the interpretation.

*Type A* primarily makes use of traditions and institutions as regulative principles of the biographical design. The church, the family, the marriage, the school etc. occur in a rather clear cut institutional shape, giving regulative orientation to one's own concept of living. The relevance of institutional bindings for the individual life-style is not in question. We found this type within teachers born between 1940 and 1950 whose childhood and youth took place before the cultural break of the late 1960s.

Another *Type B* puts more emphasis on the individual responsibility to design and conduct of one's life. This type refers from case to case or situational to different systems of regulation, tapping different resources. It can be tradition and institution, but the subjective decision-making is the prevailing regulative principle.

In one single case we figured out another *Type C* who organised religious meaning in his life around here-and-now events. Religion has in parts been instrumentalised as an on-going entertainment to keep a fluency of exciting experiences.

#### 4.2 Patterns of teaching religion

The interviewees were asked for the basic rationales, convictions, and criteria of their lesson planning as well as their teaching practice. The "taught" religion was what they had in mind, heart, and memory, how they reasoned about their teaching practice. We did not observe them teaching. In the narrative interview nearly all teachers shared the conviction that religion must be subjected to critical reflection. They shared the desire to avoid dogmatic rigidity in teaching religion, but showed different patterns RE basically is shaped of.

The patterns were spread out in a four-factor-field: Religion is regarded more or less a) as a system of doctrines, b) as a system of ethical guidelines, c) as a matter of language and d) as a space of experiences.

<b>doctrines</b>	<b>language</b>
<b>ethos</b>	<b>space</b>

The teachers preferred different aspects and/or combination of aspects. Most of them put emphasis on one major factor with certain accents on one or two others. Only quite a few could talk about the problem of how to find a balance between these dimensions of teaching religion to different students in a classroom.

*"Doctrines"* refers to a concept of teaching which emphasises content information about religion and a discursive knowledge approach.

*"Ethos"* is primarily focussed on religion as a moral or ethical advice for living. There is a close relationship to *"doctrines"* because moral attitudes can be developed along content and regulative knowledge. *"Ethos"* refers to the function of giving ethical orientation in one's life.

*"Language"* takes into consideration that religion is not reduced to doctrines or ethics, but is a matter of narratives, parables, symbols, myth, and spirituality. The language is

not at all a packaging material for the biblical doctrine, but a different expression of meaning that cannot be translated or transferred in a different form.

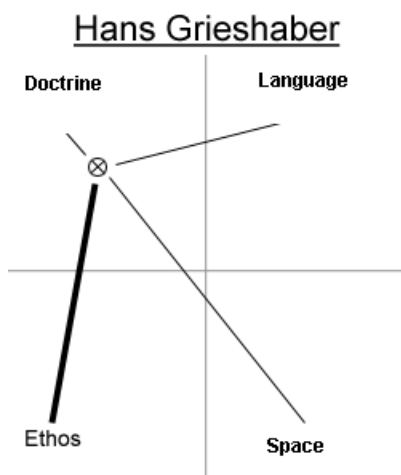
“Space” expands the previous language representation of religion to body shapes, gestures, liturgical forms and aesthetic habits. Religion is represented in scenarios, real or symbolic rooms which go beyond narratives.

There are close links and fluent combinations between these factors: “doctrines” and “language” are related to the hermeneutic of (biblical) texts. “Language” and “space” are related to literary and artistic (dramaturgical) grounds of religious expressions. Between “space” and “ethos” different styles of piety and action-models form a continual line. The relation between “ethos” and “doctrines” is generated by a discursive/arguing language.

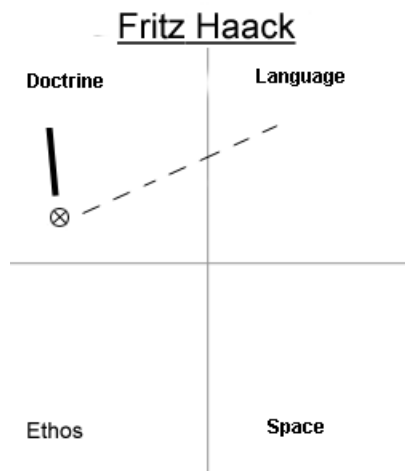
The teaching habitus of the RE-teachers could be elaborated by looking at their preferences, using the four-factor-field as a folio of interpretation.

**(1) Teaching habitus: negotiation of doctrines** (to impart RE as a system of knowledge doctrines)

Our assumption was that the elder and male teachers belonged to this group. This was not the case: a younger and female one belonged to the same group. But there was no one out of the group of primary school teachers or those teaching at a vocational school. There are several variations within this teaching habit: Hans Grieshaber – for example – prefers doctrines, but a strong relationship between discursive language and ethos as well.



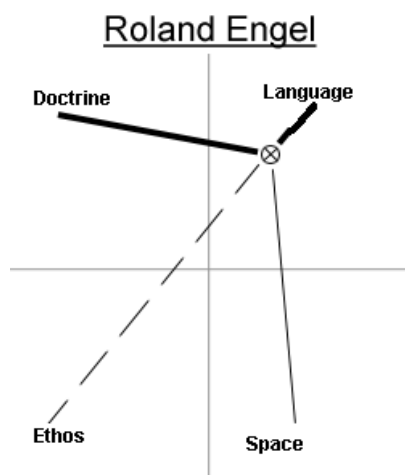
Looking at the diagram you find the biographical position of the person marked as a dot, and the lines to the fields in different intensity: strong intensity means a remarkable association to the factor field, weak intensity is a soft or (less) a dotted line.



Fritz Haack is a younger secondary school teacher. His preference of personal religion is situated in the same field as his educational preference: teaching religion as a system of knowledge and doctrines.

**(2) Teaching habitus: hermeneutic of language and symbols**

According to Roland Engel the task of religious education in the secondary classroom is under tension between public denominational self-understanding and distant reflection. He tries to keep this tension by establishing religion as a system of language and symbols.



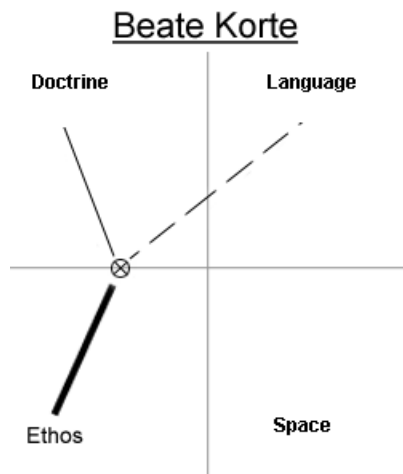
A passage in his interview is explaining this attitude:

*“Well, there are my own limitations. I do not like to dissect (analyse) psalms as mere texts. What is much more important to me is – how can I say it – to find a certain “place within life”. That is ..... The text is functioning in its religious quality. If I look at the incline (slope?) within the psalm ...I can make use of it only if I get involved in it, if I speak the words and walk through the valley up to the height. Well, to make this clear to the pupils, that an emotional state can be touched by joining in saying, possibly, even without reflection, that there is a moment of comfort while reiterating the psalm. Self-*

*comforting (laughing) one could say somehow. To make this accessible is really important to me. This is one of my goals or what I constantly try to pursue...”*

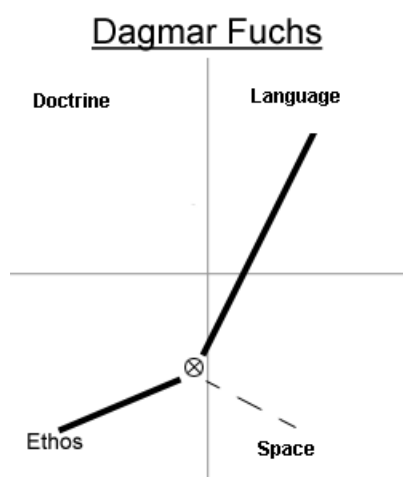
### **(3) Teaching habitus: opening access to ethical orientation in one’s life**

In their biographical orientation these persons emphasise Christian ethic, and they put emphasis on this dimension in their teaching concept, but do not exclude alternative dimensions.



Beate Korte for example realises her personal Religion in a form of parochial welfare and social work. When she discovered a problem-centred concept of religious education in her early teaching time, she mentioned that “religious education became an interesting subject again because of the connection to real life”.

Several persons in this group have no relationship to the “space”-dimension, and only weak expressions of “language” relations, except Dagmar Fuchs:



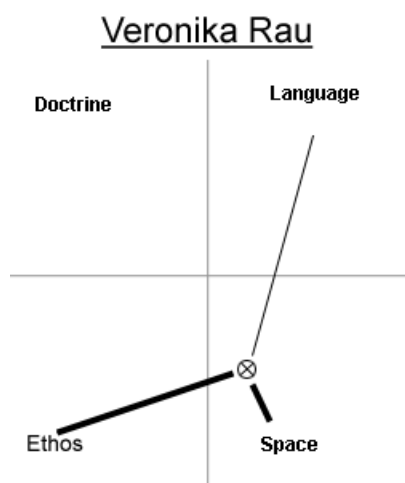
In this group Dagmar Fuchs is the only one who teaches in a primary school, and she is younger than 30. She is enthusiastic about the behaviour of children in one of her classes: *“I had no idea before that religion can be so exciting in school (laughing), because of the children – it is an amazing ... class, who keeps in-depth thinking and is*

able to utter freely what they think. And I was stimulated from the questions of the children after a while... And my own, well 'organised', or my own structured faith had been shaken by the children. I came to different perspectives concerning religion, such as questioning God, bible, church, and the children were fascinating from their picturesque imaginative world."

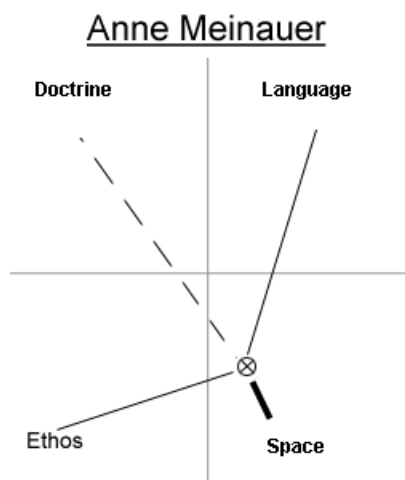
**(4) Teacher habitus: affective forming and expression of religion**

The teachers of this group emphasise the social space in which religion is lived.

Veronika Rau – for example – was raised in a protestant pastor’s home with a certain family culture. She wants to teach children by promoting experiences in a religious surrounding.



Another one, Anne Meinauer, puts emphasis on „being Christian from a firmly convincing position, deep in my heart”. She wants the children to reach such an own position themselves.



### **(5) Teacher habitus: edutainment and infotainment**

In one case we could not figure out a personal position within this four-factor-field of religion. Referring to the teaching habitus there were slight relations to the ethic and the space dimension. This means that religious education can be taught even when a personal position to religion cannot be figured. But we do not have any information what the difference means in the classroom or to what the pupils get out of it.

### **4.3 Modes of distance and nearness**

Looking at the relationship between the “lived” religion in the teachers’ biographical reconstructions and what they tell about their “taught” religion, we found variations in a line between “direct identification” on one end and “complete separation” on the other end.

From the perspective that a teacher’s personal faith is the most important determinant of “good” RE, this result needs explanations. Almost all of the interviews showed that teachers tend to avoid direct identification of what they teach with what they personally believe. They felt it could be inappropriate in teaching and learning processes to give their own conviction a standard function. On the other end, a complete separation distracts the pupils from the opportunity to learn from the religious perspectives of an authentic person with whom they are in close contact. The full identification of “lived” and “taught” religion would overwhelm the pupils’ own thinking and faith development; the teaching process must become an ideologically structured process of indoctrination. The total separation gives religion the meaning of a subject matter that is non-relevant to a personal faith. The educational potential seems to be reached at its best if the teacher finds a balance between a personal “nearness” and a self-reflective distance.

In one case the teacher’s personal position could not be identified, and he mixed up “education” with entertainment, letting pupils have fun with his thematic arrangements. We excluded this case because of its indifferent or non-educational intentions.

## **5. Discussion**

In general a critical attitude towards traditions and institutions like churches or state had been the prevalent feature of the 1968 generation, which is my own generation. Since then church is no longer firmly constructed like it was, state has changed and developed, and school has lost the previous “aura”. Since this appeal of school has been paled to insignificance, the didactic endeavour has to be magnified.

We could follow this kind of development in the narratives of the teachers.

To our surprise the protestant profile of the RE teachers turned out to be much more impressive than they themselves thought it was. Reflecting their personal, biographically developed religion they gained a distant position which enabled them to teach religion by opening an educational frame to subjectivity and autonomy of learners. Thus religion turned to become an educational subject (“Bildungsreligion”).

More than ever before teachers should be given an opportunity to work and reflect on the difference between what they believe and what they teach. An opportunity should be offered in formal pre-service as well as in in-service teacher education.

What remains up to further research: to find out if and how the different modes of distance affect the teaching and learning process in the classroom. We hope to be able to work on that in future within a group of empirical researchers.

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