



## ***Religious education in Austria: Between confessionality and pluralism***

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### **ABSTRACT**

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**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** The aim of the paper is to redefine “confessionality” in religious education in Austrian schools, regarding to changing circumstances.

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**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODOLOGY:** The paper describes the history of confessional religious education in Austria, which gets several problems in different school-situations. In some schools, there are 8 and more sorts of confessional religious education. After the description of possible alternatives, a proposal of redefining confessional education is presented.

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**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The paper starts with an overview of the history and the actual situation of religious education in Austrian schools. Currently 13 recognised religions and denominations in Austria provide religious education. In some situations religious education becomes impossible due to insufficient student numbers. So the state and religious communities will have to try and establish new models of teaching. The main part of the paper consists of pros and cons in the conceptual considerations of confessionality.

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**RESEARCH RESULTS:** It is a challenge to rethink confessional religious education: religious communities will have to take joint responsibility and provide religious education as a service to students with clear denominational features.

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**CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:** There are three first steps very necessary in the next future: Commitment of the religious communities to religious education; a new concept to try at several locations; practical support concerning multi-religious events.

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→ **KEYWORDS:** RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, CONFESSIONALITY, SCHOOL, AUSTRIA, RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

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Beginning of the school year 2015 – Styria, Austria: A primary school in a village near Graz celebrated the beginning of the new school year with a multi-religious celebration under the title “all for one – one for all.” The event was organised in collaboration between a Catholic and an Islamic religion teacher. The sign of the cross and the reading of a sura in German at the beginning were followed by a passage of the Gospels, “inter-religious prayers of intercession,” the Lord’s Prayer, a prayer of blessing, and a worship song at the end.

However, the multi-religious nature of this celebration resulted in great commotion and discontent amongst some parents and political parties, such that the school inspector in charge was called to the school and the principle had to address the issue in a letter to the parents. Many of the parents expressed concerns that Islam was a bad influence on their Catholic children.

This case is not an isolated one and could equally occur in other parts of Austria and in different situations. Religious diversity creates new challenges for schools in a Central European context in general and religious education and teachers in particular (Klutz, 2015).

Considering the above example, problems and therefore a need for action become apparent on three levels:

- Inter-religious celebrations in a school environment with students belonging to different religions: there is an increasingly notable feeling of not knowing how to deal with religious pluralism amongst teachers, parents and the school administration.
- The nature of religious education in schools: How can confessional religious education be carried out in schools in light of religious diversity and the resulting complexity concerning its content and organisation?
- Commitment by the church and religious bodies: How do the church and religious communities that offer religious education in Austrian schools define “religious education”?

This article examines the current situation regarding confessional religious education in a time of increasing religious diversity and investigates possible consequences on the three aforementioned levels.

## 1. Confessional religious education – a matter of course in Austria

Confessional religious education in Austria is regulated by the law on religious education (*Religionsunterrichtsgesetz*, federal law from 13<sup>th</sup> July

1949, Federal Law Gazette No. 190). Traditionally, “confessionality” is understood to be determined by three elements: students, teachers and curricula/content.

This definition has remained more or less uncontested for several decades.

Protestant religious education has its own schoolbooks, curricula, teachers and organisational framework, and so does Catholic religious education. The difference between different denominations lies within the framework. In most cases it is still a given that Catholic religious education forms part of the regular timetable, whereas this is seldom the case for Protestant classes. Since 1982 Islamic religious education (limited at first but becoming more widespread) and Orthodox religious education etc. are also offered where possible.

Currently there are 17 recognised religions and denominations in Austria of which 13 provide religious education (Weirer, 2012, 2013). The religious landscape has dramatically changed since the law regarding religious education was passed 66 years ago. The legal framework, on the other hand, has remained largely the same.

## 1.1. Changes in Austria: Pluralism as a framework

### 1.1.1. Pluralism on an institutional level

First and foremost, it is apparent that the notion of confessionality that forms the basis of the law regulating religious education has become nearly obsolete, as is clearly evident from the following figures:

(Religious) pluralism has firmly become part of school reality. Up to 10 or more different religions or denominations are represented in some schools, with up to 8 different religious education classes being provided. At the same time there are schools that still follow a strictly mono-confessional model, which is another characteristic phenomenon of pluralism. However, the situation with regards to religious diversity in many schools in Vienna is completely different from other parts of Austria.

Additionally, the number of students without religious affiliation is on the increase. In the school year of 2014/15 approximately 68,500 of 947,000 students were non-denominational, that is 7% (compared to 6% two years before). At primary school level the number is already close to 9%. The level of non-denominational students in compulsory schools in Vienna is over 12%, in general secondary schools in Vienna this number rises to 16% (all figures for Vienna are from the school year of 2012/2013).

Students increasingly opt out of religious education in accordance with the law on religious education. An alternative in the form of ethics as a subject was introduced in 1997/1998 for students not attending religious education in secondary schools. Currently 234 schools participate in this pilot project.

Klutz (2014) provides more detailed information on the development of institutional regulations regarding religion in Austria.

### 1.1.2. Pluralism and religious individuality

Within confessional religious education (RE) students' "confessionality" can only be seen as a formality (if the number of non-denominational students is low). It does not imply or reflect homogeneity as is evident from youth studies that also investigate religious beliefs:

Whether young people label themselves as religious appears to be independent of their belief in God or spirituality (Klutz, 2014, p. 54).

The following exemplary data was taken from the Austrian Youth Value Study in 2006/2007: The study's findings show that in general the importance of religion has not diminished for young people. 32% state that religion plays an important role in their life. Although compared to other aspects of life (e.g. family, friends, work, school) it ranks lower in importance. The relationship of young people with religion and being religious does not become stronger through institutions – on the contrary, we can observe a dissociation here – but through the positive influence it has on their lives. Regina Polak refers to this phenomenon as "unreligious openness to God" (Polak, 2008, p. 140).

The Youth Value Study 2006/2007 discovered notable ambivalences and contradictions with regards to the belief in God and the concept of God. 11% of young people interviewed said they do not believe in God when asked about their concept of God. However, when asked whether they believed in God – yes or no – the positive response rate was 30%. Although the majority of respondents believe in God regardless of ambivalences, only a minority stated that they actively practise their religion (Polak, 2008).

In summary it can be said that there is a lack of information and data concerning the current tendency towards religious pluralism of children and adolescents that influences religious education and the school environment. Subjective observations made in a small number of studies make it clear that the traditional and uncontested notion of "confessionality" in

religious education does not accurately represent the realities in classrooms today.

## 1.2. Religious education in Europe

Peter Schreiner, director of the Comenius-Institut in Muenster distinguishes between three different basic types of religious education in schools:

- f) Confessional: Religious bodies recognised by the state are responsible for curricula, the employment of religion teachers and in part their training.
- g) Confessional / non-confessional: Religious education is organised in cooperation between the state and religious bodies.
- h) Educational and scientific: The responsibility lies with the state and religious education is usually a compulsory subject for all students (Schreiner, 2004).

At the same time, Schreiner mentions changes in the “confessional” approach:

Many countries have moved away from the understanding of confessional religious education as the manifestation of a state church or majority religion (Schreiner, 2004).

Confessional approaches focus to a higher or lesser degree on the traditional triad of confessional content, teachers and students. In Germany, Protestant RE is generally open to non-Protestant students as well. In Italy students have to register for (Catholic) RE, but non-Catholic students can equally attend. Here, the ‘Catholic nature’ of religious education is defined by the teachers and the content of teaching rather than the denominations ascribed to students (Schreiner, 2004, p. 2).

## 2. Three possible alternatives on different levels in Austria

### 2.1. CoCoRE – Cooperative confessional religious education

The CoCoRE (cooperative confessional religious education) project is being supported and carried out by four state-recognised Christian communities and implemented in selected schools in Vienna since 2002/2003 (Danner, 2015, p. 47).

The initial intention of this pilot project is as follows:

Starting in 2002/2003 in Vienna the CoCoRE project aims to strengthen religious education in general, and specifically make religious education possible in schools that have thus far struggled or have been unable to organise such. The demographic development calls for such a new approach. The following guidelines have been established within the project: all Christian students shall be able to attend religious education under reasonable conditions and all teachers shall be able to teach religion under reasonable conditions (Danner, 2015, p. 48).

The implementation of CoCoRE requires specific teaching strategies. For example, delegation (one teacher is responsible for teaching all students of different denominations participating in CoCoRE for a certain time agreed upon) has many organisational advantages (e.g. timetable). Another popular strategy is that of team teaching (several teachers belonging to different denominations teach as a team). In some cases parallel teaching (two or more teachers talk about the same topic in split groups and occasionally organise classes together) is a suitable strategy. Team teaching appears to be the most popular model amongst teachers participating in CoCoRE (Danner, 2015).

It is noteworthy, however, that so far no CoCoRE specific didactics have been developed (Schweitzer, 2009).

How does CoCoRE work in a multi-religious environment?

CoCoRE demonstrates that religious pedagogy can incorporate pluralism, highlighting the familiar as well as the unfamiliar. It allows us to learn “from” and “with” each other. The central question is how to preserve denominational identity, individuality and tradition while simultaneously breaking away from the strict confessional character of religious education (Danner, 2015, p. 49).

Sonja Danner describes the current situation of CoCoRE in Vienna:

It is more and more difficult to find new participating schools and to recruit new teams to join the CoCoRE project. The project continues to be implemented where teams have been well established, even if to a lesser extent than intended. Classes separated by denominations are the status quo except for occasional joint projects (...). In summary, the new model works well in schools where the necessary framework and conditions are provided for by the administration, a sufficient number of Christian students is enrolled in religious education classes and the teachers demonstrate a good working relationship (Danner, 2015, p. 51).

## 2.2. ÖRF Statement 2009

Already in 2009 the ÖRF (Österreichische Religionspädagogische Forum – Austrian Forum for Religious Education) has put confessional religious education, its possibilities and limits on its agenda. The position paper drawn up in Schlierbach in late 2009 states that “students increasingly contribute towards more religious diversity in schools” (ÖRF, 2010, p. 62). Therefore, schools, amongst other institutions, have a responsibility to provide a supportive environment for open communication in order to promote differences and diversity in a positive light.

Religious education should encourage the development of children’s and adolescents’ identity as well as tolerance towards different ideologies and religions (ÖRF, 2010, p. 62).

What does this mean for institutions struggling on an organisational level?

If confessional religious education becomes impossible due to insufficient student numbers, religious communities providing religious education have to establish new models of teaching considering school types, location and environment in order to ensure that schools meet their duties regarding religious education (ÖRF, 2010).

With regards to the topic of this article it can be concluded that religious education is no longer a singular subject, but characterised by context-specific pluralism.

## 2.3. “Religious education and the challenges of religious pluralism” (Klutz, 2015)

In his study published in 2015 Philipp Klutz investigates challenges posed by religious pluralism with regards to religious education and how this diversity is perceived in the school environment.

Nonetheless, Klutz’s study provides several findings pertaining to (confessional) religious education:

Klutz first proposes to look at religious education from an institutional level.

This empirical study demonstrates that institutional structures as well as the functions and understanding ascribed to religious education result in its marginalisation in schools. Religious education is perceived as a minor and less important subject whose educational role is primarily on a meta

level (values education). Furthermore, religious education is considered to be a purely denominational subject promoting confessional faith traditions (catechetical objective) (Klutz, 2015, p. 241).

Therefore, religious education has to be adapted to the individual circumstances in different schools and classrooms and its position within the general education system has to be re-evaluated.

In a second proposal and in line with the ÖRF statement, Klutz argues for a joint development of context-specific models of religious education between schools, the church and religious communities (Klutz, 2015).

Klutz's ideas are valuable and highly relevant. It remains uncertain, however, whether new models conceived within the current conceptual framework are enough or whether "confessionality" itself has to be redefined within a completely altered and more diverse context. The following chapter will challenge the notion of confessionality, arguments for and against confessional religious education will be elaborated on and ways forward towards an organic (re)development of confessionality considering (religious) diversity will be proposed.

### 3. Religious education – quo vadis?

What does it mean to plan, develop and organise religious education in light of inevitable (religious) diversity? The recent debate within religious pedagogy questions the notion of confessionality but also puts forward arguments for confessional religious education.

#### 3.1. Confessionality – pros and cons

Concerns that emerged in recent years can be grouped into two main categories: practical and conceptual considerations.

Practical considerations first and foremost relate to organisational challenges due to religious pluralism, decreasing student numbers attending religious education, an increase in non-denominational students etc.

These are all reasons why schools face

difficulties in providing confessional religious education. These difficulties have reached a level that acts as a deterrent to the traditional confessional model of teaching and has led to the emergence of various individual solutions (Englert, 2014, p. 368).

Conceptual considerations according to Rudolf Englert are as follows:

Why should religious education and the understanding of religion by adolescents be solely based on traditions of only one religious community? It has become increasingly difficult to defend this position. What makes one religious tradition better than another? These questions clearly put pressure on the traditional confessional approach (Englert, 2014, pp. 368-369).

Confessional religious education has repeatedly been criticised for its narrow focus on religious and ideological specifics that puts differences rather than similarities in the foreground, separating rather than bringing different religions and denominations closer together (Gärtner, 2015). This argument is also put forward by advocates of introducing ethics as a neutral subject as an alternative to confessional religious education.

Despite all these concerns, the following is a non-exhaustive list of what can be said in support of confessional religious education?

A “common *theological argument*” is that religion is only expressed in specific religious and societal realities and therefore can only be discussed in its concrete manifestations and not in abstract terms (Englert, 2014).

“*Debates within education theory*” go further in questioning the educational potential of different types of religious education. The general argument here is that the necessary level of detail, depth and personal challenge fundamental for religious education is only possible by focusing on preferably one main religious tradition (Englert, 2014). Mirjam Schambeck follows a similar line of argumentation in her proposal that “religion should flourish in and of its own:”

Religion (...) cannot be grasped fully through the means of discourse. Due to its existential dimension, i.e. its existence in people’s lives, religion can only be fully understood in its multi-dimensional expression as a philosophy of life (subjective and objective in its existential and expressive form). This, however, requires a spokesperson that communicates religion from a first-person perspective (Schambeck, 2015, pp. 551-552).

One of the most common but equally problematic arguments also put forward by Schambeck is that the “formation of values” is a core responsibility of religious education. At the same time Schambeck also suggests – rightly so – that religious education cannot be reduced to this one task on a functional level (Schambeck, 2015). She notes that a clear position is essential for the teaching of values:

Denominational religious education, however, would ensure that values education is linked to and based on certain points of view – Christian, Islamic, Jewish etc. Unlike independent and neutral subjects it can serve to highlight, reflect on and explore the values of one's own religion as well as reveal its scope and limitations with regards to one's view on life with all its consequences (Schambeck, 2015, p. 550).

This demonstrates that neutral “values education” is neither feasible nor should values be accepted without questioning them. In contrast, targeted values education based on transparent normative principles allows for a critical examination of certain value-oriented concepts from different perspectives.

The same debate is applicable to and takes place with regards to “*identity formation*.”

Advocates of confessional RE argue (...) that the ability to understand and reflect on the roots, traditions and ideologies of one's religion or belief system is imperative in developing one's religious and ideological identity. This requires clear personal positioning, especially and including by teachers (...) (Gärtner, 2015, p. 169).

In recent years, this debate on religious education as identity formation has sparked extensive discussions within the religious pedagogic community that all lead to one question: Are teachers of religious education as it is today “witnesses of faith or experts on religion” (Englert, 2012, pp. 77-88)?

### 3.2. Rethinking confessionality

The above considerations outline the current challenges resulting from different situations as well as the specific situation in Austria:

How do the continuous shifts and changes influence the concept of confessional religious education and therefore confessionality?

Several general patterns are becoming apparent, even though no comprehensive concept has been established yet:

The discussion in Germany, where the situation is largely similar except for minor differences, emerges to be in favour of maintaining confessional religious education and developing it towards a cooperative approach. Mirjam Schambeck stresses that

denominational does [not] equal mono-confessional religious education. Its structure and organisation – whether confessional (based on the triad

of teacher, content and students belonging to the same denomination), cooperative confessional, multi-religious, accessible to non-denominational students or students of other religions etc. – is of secondary importance and depends on the local environment and situational challenges. It is imperative, however, for an adaptable religious education to be based on strong and clear positions (Schambeck, 2015, p. 552).

Cooperative confessional religious education as piloted by several states in Germany has yielded partly positive and partly ambivalent experiences (Kuld, Schweitzer, Tzscheetzsch & Weinhardt, 2009) The DKV (Deutscher Katecheten-Verein – German Catechist Association) was a pioneer in 1992 by proposing that religious education should become the joint responsibility of the different religious communities (Englert, 2014). From an Austrian perspective it is interesting to note that the German approach to cooperative confessional religious education, in theory as well as in practice, exclusively meant the cooperation between the Protestant and Catholic church; other denominations and religions are only considered to play a comparatively marginal role. In this respect the situation in Austria is inherently different from that in Germany due to student demographics (Weirer, 2015).

Nonetheless, there are also many arguments in support of confessional religious education in Austria. The alternative would either be to remove religious education from the syllabus or substitute it with a “neutral” subject providing “learning about religion” (Grimmitt, 1987; Roebben, 2009). Practical experiences indicate that this simplified form of religious learning is met with little response.

Still, the notion of confessionality in an Austrian context deserves to be reimagined on a conceptual and organisational level:

### 3.2.1. Conceptually rethinking confessionality

From a theological perspective, religion always exhibits a confessional character when practiced actively. With respect to the traditional confessional triad this aspect of religion rests with the teacher. Teachers of religious education also live in a world of (religious) pluralism and have their own personal and diverse experiences with religious traditions, which they feel more or less rooted in.

Religious education becomes particularly interesting for students when teachers introduce confessionality in a less strict and theoretical and a more tangible way that Kuhlmann refers to as “*confessional identity*” (Kuhlmann, 2010, p. 131).

Confessional identity intends to describe beliefs, their expression and their position within a religious community in an environment characterised by ideological and religious pluralism as they are perceived and understood by individuals and groups of people (...). Although cognitive aspects are central to this approach to identity, confessional identity is not limited to a dogma professed to in creeds, but includes the practical manifestations through which people express their faith (Kuhlmann, 2010, p. 131).

This perspective puts teachers and their (continued) training in focus, highlighting their responsibility and importance; requirements that are already implicitly and structurally expected today.

Such an approach would establish the relevance of the Synod of Würzburg (1974) and constitute a departure from forcing confessionality within the student body.

From an education theory standpoint the question is what religion can contribute to education. Religion is more than its confessional character. Before looking at denominational specifics, the bigger picture of religious education and its importance within the educational system has to be investigated and analysed. That is the development of general religious competence that enables students to be aware of and sensitive to religious messages, behaviour, rituals and issues, and to express their own beliefs and religious position while simultaneously demonstrating openness towards other / unfamiliar / foreign forms of religion.

First promising steps are being made by the cooperation between the different religious communities represented in general secondary schools in the development of a joint guideline for competence-oriented school leaving exams in religious education (Prettenthaler & Weirer, 2013).

The novelty of this guideline lies in the creation of a competency model and a catalogue of competencies applicable to all religious education classes in Austria, which reflect and form the basis of a common approach to religious education. This model has not been “decreed” by a superordinate body or one denomination/religion. It is the result of a detailed and content-oriented process of engagement and interchange. It is the first document in Austria relating to and dealing with the realities of religious education in the classroom not focussing on any one specific denomination or religious community.

The intent is not to omit differences, but to provide denomination-specific and competence-oriented exemplary topics and tasks for the school leaving examination on the basis of the joint competency model.

This joint model does not seek to create interdenominational religious education; rather it provides a template to be filled with denomination-specific content. Above all, the common goal uniting individual denominational

agendas is to provide religious education of the highest quality in Austria (Pretenthaler & Weirer, 2013).

Such multi-religious collaborations questioning and re-evaluating religious education at state schools are still in their infancy and have to break through the perception of being additional extras in order to become more widespread.

One question this new approach poses is the form and organisation of religious education. One solution could take the shape of joint multi-religious classes where one or preferably more teachers teach religion from their respective denominational point of view as a basis. (The feasibility and extent of such classes would depend on regional and school-specific conditions). This basic form of religious education could and should then be supplemented with denominational (but not confessionally restricted) classes. In the long run these joint classes could be made accessible also to non-denominational students in the spirit of “religious education for all.”

Such a model would require religious communities to take joint responsibility and provide religious education as a service to students with clear denominational features.

#### 4. Necessary first steps

With regards to the challenges outlined in the introduction above, action has to be taken on three levels:

- Commitment

Religious bodies and communities that provide religious education in schools in Austria have to come together and discuss what role religious education should play for students and their development and education.

- Concept

New context-specific and adaptable models for denominational religious education are necessary within an environment characterised by religious pluralism. The same applies to teacher training, which is currently exclusively focussed on mono-confessional religious education.

- Practical support

Detailed models and support structures have to be developed for multi-religious events and other situations that occur within the school environment. These models then have to be authorised by the school administration to provide the necessary legal framework. One example of such a model can be found in the advisory centre for interreligious and intercultural matters at KPH (University College of Teacher Education

of Christian Churches Vienna/Krems) and IRPA (private programme for a teaching degree in Islamic religious education at state schools in Vienna) (Kowanda-Yassin & Garcia Sobreira-Majer, 2015).

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