

**Studying Religion Critically in Universities and Schools:
Bridging the Gap?¹**

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ABSTRACT

The article tries to identify the place of the critical Study of Religion in universities and schools, comparing examples for different recent developments in Germany and Britain. One decisive issue in this respect is the question if the critical Study of Religion as a discipline or as (critical) *education about Religion* is visible at all and if the differences to other, often much better known (often religious) approaches are acknowledged or played down. The discussed examples (a judgement of the German *Federal Constitutional Court* on the religious limitation of the academic freedom of professors of theology, the BA report on *Theology and Religious Studies Provision in UK Higher Education* and the report of the Commission on Religious Education) highlight some subtleties of a complex field where important facts and distinctions remain concealed to non-specialists. With respect to RE, the article argues that these dynamics fit the concept of "small-i-indoctrination". Referring to Katharina Frank's empirical research on the communication of knowledge about religion (*Religionskunde*) it spells out the important distinctions that need to be made explicit in order to make the characteristics of a *critical* (secular) approach better known.

KEYWORDS

Religious Studies, Religious Education, Germany, TRS, school, university, the academic Study of Religion, *Religionskunde*, education about religion, human rights

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¹ This article is the written version of a keynote held at the (virtual) 2021 BASR annual conference in Edinburgh.

'If you don't know the difference between theology and religious studies, then you are a theologian.' (Brian Bocking)²

Introduction

Religion-related discourse in education is a complex field. In the context of that field, I will, in this paper, try to locate the place of the critical study of religion, both in universities and in schools - and the frequently perceived gap between the critical academic Study of Religion (SOR)³ and the often affirmative ways of framing religion in schools.

Having studied the subtleties of that field and the intersection between school and university for many years in different European countries, the *designation* 'complex field' almost sounds like a euphemism to my ears. I could as well say 'mess'. While 'complex field' perhaps implies that I have been able to identify some structures and am able to analyse and to some extent explain these structures and the logic of the field, using the term 'mess' admits that, to me, matters still seem to be out of (analytic) control. I cannot really put the picture together, since there is not enough systematic research to provide a well-structured analysis of the different layers, logics and dynamics of that field. I would love to provide a nice narrative and order the field, but have the strong feeling that I am not there yet. I cannot explain fully this 'mess'.

I can, however, give some impressions of aspects and examples that I regard as relevant in this field as I construct it. And I think that some interesting patterns become visible with the perspective I take and the sources I use. I will start with identifying some of the layers that are important elements of my picture of this 'complex field' - or mess:

- Religious Studies (RS) as an academic discipline, with its associations, such as IAHR, EASR and BASR, which I regard as a 'safe space' in the sense that you can speak freely about the effects of different ways of framing religion, without, at the same time, being (all too) strategical or political.
- RS in the context of other disciplines with different perspectives on 'religion', where the results of RS research do not count as given or 'self-evident'.
- The politics and the strategical production of knowledge.
- Social and political discourse on religion, with its own rules and emphases.
- Religion in school education - without any doubt a 'complex field' in itself, furthermore, often related to moral education and spiritual development.

² Quoted in Corrywright and Morgan 2006: 50. The original quotation "if you don't know the difference, you're a theologian" can be found in Bocking 1994: 2.

³ I prefer and use 'the academic Study of Religion' as term for the secular discipline that is also called Religious Studies, the History of Religions (as in the IAHR) or the Study of Religions (as in the BASR or EASR), cf. German *Religionswissenschaft*.

The picture becomes even more complex when the study of these layers, their mutual dependence and entanglements, relates to various local, national, regional and global contexts.

Using the term 'critical study of religion', I should proceed to explain what the term 'critical' implies in this context. I am referring to the academic, impartial Study of Religion (SOR) that is independent from the interests of any religious (or anti-religious) community and uses the methods of the social and cultural sciences (cf, for example, Jensen/Rothstein 2000). This excludes other, also academic, approaches to religion. The mission statement of the *International Association for the History of Religions* (IAHR) formulates the distinction between these approaches very clearly:

As such, the IAHR is the preeminent international forum for the critical, analytical and cross-cultural study of religion, past and present. The IAHR is not a forum for confessional, apologetical, or other similar concerns.
(IAHR 2022).

The last sentence of the quote has also been adopted by the BASR and is included in its constitution and self-representation on its website (BASR 2022).

Furthermore, I am taking up both critiques that have been formulated within the discipline and interdisciplinary issues that have questioned the self-conception of the SOR, which, together have led to what the conference organisers, in their virtual welcome, have called a 'sharp critique of many of the field's categories and axioms' (Sutcliffe 2021). This includes criticism of the world religions paradigm (WRP), of the category of religion itself as well as challenges from, for example, post-structuralist, post-colonial and gender-reflexive critique.

My own conclusion from the consideration of all these critiques is a discursive approach (see, for example, Taira 2016 and von Stuckrad 2013), in which all discourse about religion is regarded as the subject matter of the critical Study of Religion, including the current hegemonic discourses about religion (such as the WRP), which then, become themselves objects of critical study, rather than being reproduced as frameworks for studying religion (see Alberts 2017).

I am fully aware that, in many contexts, this field, of which we are ourselves a part, is frequently highly political and academic and strategic interests may be in conflict. I want to emphasise that I appreciate the acknowledgement of the political dimension and respect if colleagues come to different conclusions and take other decisions about how to deal in practice with these conflicting interests and fields.

In this paper, I would like to discuss the following theses on the critical study of religion, explain these with the help of examples from Germany and Britain

and would like to initiate further disciplinary discussion about the consequences for the academic Study of Religion:

1. *The independent, critical Study of Religion represents a very small minority within the educational discourse on religion.*
2. *It is very uncomfortable to do, defend and promote the critical Study of Religion (normally, to different degrees at universities and schools).*
3. *Not defending the independent, critical Study of Religion will result in the disappearance of the discipline.*

With respect to situation in Germany, the theses may be specified as follows:

1. *Theology has a firm grasp on the discourse about religion in Germany.*
2. *The 'marriage' with theology is not as convenient for the Study of Religion as it may seem.*
3. *There is hardly any critical study of religion in schools in Germany at all. This virtual absence of the critical study of religion in schools in Germany is one consequence of the invisibility of the Study of Religion as an independent academic discipline.*

1. Religion at German Universities

Counting numbers of professorships, seminars or institutes, it is evident that theology is the predominant discipline in the field of religion-related academic disciplines in Germany. Even though the Study of Religion has grown considerably in the past years (cf. Stausberg 2012; 2017), particularly in the numbers of students, and theology has declined, it seems safe to say that the Study of Religions does not constitute more than 5-10% of that field. This system has its roots in long-standing church-state contracts regulating the status and funding of theological faculties, resulting in a strong theological tradition with large established faculties at most universities as well as colleges of higher education and seminaries.

In 2010, the German Science and Humanities Council published a report on the situation of theologies and religion-related disciplines at German Universities (Wissenschaftsrat 2010) and gave recommendations for strategies for further developing these disciplines. The council emphasises the unclear situation of the discipline of the Study of Religions (Wissenschaftsrat 2010: 48), due to the fact that it is often not clearly separated from theology, but part of theological faculties. At the time, this was the case for about half of the professorships in the Study of Religion in Germany. The council recommends that larger institutes for the Study of Religion shall be founded and independent study programmes shall be established. Above all, it regards it as decisive for the further development of the discipline that chairs for the Study of Religions shall be established outside theological contexts in which the mentioned church-state contracts provide a restrictive organisational framework. The latter include, for example, that the respective church has to approve of a professor before they can be appointed, or, frequently,

requirements of a degree in theology and membership of the denomination (Wissenschaftsrat 2010, 88).

The case of Professor Gerd Lüdemann may demonstrate what these church-state contract based restrictions of professors of theology involve with respect to freedom of research and teaching. The related judgement of the German Federal Constitutional Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*, BVerfG 2008) may, furthermore, provide some details of the legal restrictions that apply to professors at theological faculties (or at other institutions with professorships which are dependent on the state-church contracts).

Gerd Lüdemann was a German theologian, appointed professor for the New Testament at the University of Göttingen in 1983. In his historical critical approach to the New Testament he came to the conclusion that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not a historical fact ('the grave was full') and criticised the church for the distortion of history, for example, in this book *The Great Deception. And what Jesus really said and did* (Lüdemann 1999). The confederation of protestant churches in Lower Saxony asked the Ministry of Science first to remove Lüdemann from the state service as professor and later from the Theological faculty. The story has many nuances, but the result is, that Lüdemann, against his will, was removed to an 'institute of special studies' outside the teaching programmes in theology.⁴ His case produced a remarkable document on the legal basis for religious restrictions of theology in Germany. Lüdemann did not accept his removal and his case went through the different levels of the legal apparatus until the Federal Constitutional Court took a decision on the issue in 2008. The court clearly confirmed the restriction of the freedom of research and teaching of professors of theology: 'The freedom of science of professors of Theology is limited by the religions community's right to self-determination and (...) the right of the faculty to protect its identity as theological faculty and to fulfil its task in training theologians.' (BVerfG 2008:1). The court explains: the state has decided 'to establish theology as confessionally bound belief-science at its universities' (59, *bekennnisgebundene Glaubenswissenschaft*).⁵ Thus, 'belief-truths' (*Glaubenswahrheiten*) become the subject of state-owned university education (61). The consequence is 'not that theological faculties become church institutions, but institutions of such central relevance for church life that the right of the church to self-determination requires cooperation.' (59) As the state cannot decide about the question if something is in accordance with the confession of a denomination, it has to transfer this judgement to the respective religious institution. Thus, the church not only has to approve of a candidate for a chair in theology, but may, in addition, as the Lüdemann case has shown, remove somebody from this particular chair if this scholars' teaching and research is not in line with its confession.

This has serious consequences also for chairs in the Study of Religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) at theological faculties, as the legal status of these

⁴ For more information on Lüdemann and his case see Universität Göttingen 2020.

⁵ Note that the quotations from the judgements are my own translations from the German text. The English official version of the judgement, published in the same place, is terminologically less explicit.

chairs is the same as for other chairs in theology. Also for these chairs, the freedom of science is restricted by the religious communities' right to self-determination - a clear contradiction to the self-conception of the academic Study of Religion as an independent discipline in line with other social and cultural sciences. This contradiction is acknowledged in the recommendation of the German Science and Humanities Council to clearly separate the academic study of religion and its chairs from contexts that are restricted by church-state contracts (theological institutions).⁶

For the relationship between RS and theology the marriage metaphor is frequently used, not least in the sense of 'marriage of convenience', i.e. not a passionate relationship, but one of which both parts expect that life in general becomes more convenient. The Study of Religions frequently profits from participating in the privileges of theology and the inclusion of the Study of Religions in its canon perhaps makes theology in modern universities more justified.

When I took my chair at the University of Hanover, my predecessor, Peter Antes, explained the newly founded 'Institute for Theology and the Study of Religion' as a 'forced marriage', the only way to save the chair that he formerly held in the present university structure that requests bigger units. Even though the chair in the Study of Religions is outside the reach of church-state contracts, this was, for example, not evident to the Ministry of Education which asked the church to confirm that it has no say in the appointment, a procedure that delayed the appointment process for months. When I began the process of founding an independent institute for the Study of Religion in 2018, the dynamics and emotional component of the administrative process resembled in many ways a rose war and a divorce, not at all convenient for myself as the initiator of this process. Sparing this paper the details, I only want to mention that the head of the institute, a theologian, sent a letter to the board of the faculty, stating that I had not properly done the job I had been appointed for (attaching the advertisement), as I obviously did not cooperate with theology in the way it had been 'hoped' for. My situation (and quality of sleep) improved when the independent Institute for the Study of Religion was founded in 2019. The support of the German Association for the Study of Religions (*Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft*, DVRW, see Klinkhammer 2018) was a very important element of the success of this process, as the complexity of the issues was not intuitively understood by the university administration. In addition to the bachelor programme in the Study of Religion, which is also part of a teacher training programme for the non-confessional alternative to confessional religious education in Lower Saxony

⁶ It may be added, on this issue, that the consequence of the recommendation by the German Science and Humanities Council was not a process of taking the respective Study of Religion chairs out of theological faculties, but marking these chairs clearly theologically, with denominations that combine the Study of Religion and Theology, further mystifying instead of sharpening the profile and character of 'the Study of Religion'. This is, for example, the case in a recent advertisement of a chair in 'The Study of Religions and Intercultural Theology' by the Protestant-theological faculty of the University of Münster, which, in addition, explicitly states that candidates should belong to a Protestant Church. Teaching will be directed towards pastoral study programmes, teacher training for confessional religious education, but also towards Religious Studies programmes (Universität Münster 2022).

called 'values and norms', the institute has established a new international double degree master programme 'Religion in the Public Sphere', in cooperation with sociology (and with partners from Södertörn University in Stockholm and University Roma Tre). Both programmes and all their courses are clearly differentiated from theological approaches to religion or study programmes in theology.

2. Religion at German Schools

In Germany, most religion-related education in public schools is firmly in the hands of religious communities, above all the Protestant and Catholic churches with well-established models of religious education (RE). The religious communities which offer RE have the right to represent and frame all content of education about religion (also all teaching about 'other religions' as part of the course) within their respective confessional subjects. The general framework behind this approach is the separative model in which children, when it comes to teaching about religion, are separated into different groups, according to their religious or non-religious affiliation. Children who attend any version of confessional RE are taught by teachers approved by the respective religious communities. Children who do not wish to take part in confessional RE are normally obliged to take part in some non-confessional 'alternative subject'.

That confessional religious education shall be taught 'in accordance with the principles of the religious communities' (GG art. 7.3), overseen by the state, is laid down in the German constitution. The judgement of the Federal Constitutional Court (2008) on the Lüdemann issue is instructive also about the legal framework for RE, as it interprets the 'principles (*Grundsätze*) of the religious communities' (GG art. 7.3), on which, according to the constitution, RE in Germany is based, as *religious dogmas*: '[t]he orientation towards the dogmas (*Glaubenssätze*) of the respective confession is prescribed in the constitution' (BVerfG 2008: section 54).

For children who attend this standard model of RE the perspective on religion is framed by just one single denomination, normally during their whole school life. As we have seen, this perspective is in many ways dependent on religious interpretations, albeit with respect to the content of teacher training (cf. the Lüdemann case), the appointment of teachers or the orientation towards central dogmas of the respective denomination. This leads me to the question if there is any *critical*, in the above sense, *religiously independent* study of religion in German schools.

The educational field in Germany is complex, not least due to its federal organisation. Together with colleagues in the academic Study of Religion who also have an interest in studying this field empirically with respect to critical education about religion, we have analysed the situation of *Religionskunde* (i.e. the critical study of religion which is independent of religious institutions) in all 16 German federal states. The result of this collaboration is the

Handbuch Religionskunde in Deutschland which is about to be published (Alberts, Juninger, Neef and Wöstemeyer 2023). The findings are disillusioning: in German schools there is hardly any critical study of religion at all. Within the separative paradigm, on which education about religion in most federal states is based, critical education about religion is, at best, a (generally small) part of the substitute 'ethics' (as they are often called) subjects, i.e. compulsory electives only for those children who do not want to choose any of the confessional options. Only in Berlin is there an obligatory integrative 'ethics' subject, in a framework where confessional RE is purely optional with no obligatory substitute subject. However, it contains only very little education about religion. In Brandenburg, the integrative subject *Lebensgestaltung, Ethik, Religionskunde* (LER) has more education about religion, however, it is not compulsory, as pupils may opt out and chose confessional RE instead.

A pattern that emerges in the comparative analysis of the different models in the federal states is that the religiously dependent character of most teaching about religion is frequently concealed in much discourse about RE, both with respect to the general rules of the game (the legal and organisational facts) and the character of RE, which is framed as somewhat 'not as confessional as it used to be', often supported by general subject names such as simply 'religion' on the pupils timetables.⁷ What is more, in the federal states that have 'inclusive' dialogical models (Hamburg and Bremen) with an inter-religious approach, the religious character is often obscured and the right to withdrawal almost invisible to parents, even if the model explicitly dissociates itself from an RS-based *learning about religion* approach. While the latter is frequently criticised by secular agents, not least the Humanist Associations (see, for example Säkulares Forum Hamburg, SFH 2022), another problem seems to be visible only to the small group of scholars in the academic Study of Religion with an interest in RE issues, i.e. the fact that also the nominally non-confessional alternatives to RE frequently represent and frame religion(s) from an at least implicitly, sometimes even explicitly, theological or confessional perspective, invisible to laypeople for whom the religious framing of religion that they know from other contexts seems to be given without alternative. This has been called 'small-c-confessional' (Jensen and Kjeldsen 2013: 188) RE within a general context that I have called 'small-i-indoctrination' (Alberts 2019). In most cases where education about religion is institutionalised at all, it uncritically follows the pattern of the world religions paradigm frequently, except for the study of Christianity, which gets a particular treatment - which may, of course, be regarded as an inherent part of the world religions paradigm itself.

This is accompanied by prevailing general presuppositions about education about religion in public discourse, including the view that religion either cannot really be studied from a secular perspective and, if this was intended, it would

⁷ Even my daughter, who is exempted from RE in primary school where there is currently no legal substitute subject, comes home with a timetable that includes 'religion'. I know that the group of pupils is separated and that she and some other pupils get some teaching that will, perhaps, sometimes develop into something like 'values and norms', the subject in secondary school. However, she told me that I must not complain to her teacher, as this would be very embarrassing - a difficult parent who does not accept the way the school simply is.

result in something like a cold 'naming of facts'. Discourse on RE also rarely includes reflection about the fact that in this separative system, the perspective of one particular denomination is regarded as sufficient education about religion for a pupil during their whole school life, putting this community in the exclusivist position to also represent 'religion' in general and its own, unquestioned version also of 'other' religions. Furthermore, in the generally separative German framework, non-confessional education about religion is, at best, regarded as something for a secular minority. Following the logic of ascribing some kind of moral superiority to religion and regarding confessional RE as an important element of moral education, this minority will, above all, be taught how to be a good human being, also without religion. Somebody who does not take part in confessional (or in Hamburg and Bremen interreligious) RE is regarded as lacking educationally necessary moral education - in all states but in Berlin, where moral education (the compulsory subject 'ethics') and confessional RE are regarded as completely different independent concerns. This also explains why the names of the alternative subjects to RE do not include 'Religionskunde', but 'values and norms', 'ethics', 'practical philosophy' etc.

RS-based RE⁸ has hardly any institutionalisation in Germany and is, furthermore, hardly known as an approach to RE in schools. Thus, the above-mentioned handbook documents very nicely but soberingly in detail the absence of the critical study of religion (*Religionskunde*) in almost all German federal states, despite a general discourse that somehow implies that nowadays all RE would be something like *Religionskunde*.

3. Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) in Britain

When I read The British Academy's report on Theology and Religious Studies Provision in UK Higher Education (BA 2019) I was quite surprised about how it constructs 'Theology and Religious Studies' as one single discipline, and uses it, furthermore, synonymously also with 'the Study of Religion' (see, for example, BA 2019: 2). The report is concerned with explaining falling student numbers, particularly since the reforms concerning fees and funding in 2012. It intends to inform the debate about 'the discipline' (ibid.), in order to 'provide an objective analysis of the evidence to assess the overall health and development of Theology and Religious Studies as one of the key disciplines that the Academy represents.' (BA 2019: 29)

The response of the BASR to this report (BASR 2021) can be related, in many ways, to the theses in the beginning of this paper. It sketches a picture of hegemonic structures and discourses that, despite all differences, resemble in important characteristics aspects, the German situation. First of all, it highlights the importance of the 'major epistemological and ontological differences' (BASR 2021: 10) between the disciplines:

⁸ For the concept of RS-based RE, see Jensen 2008 and EASR 2022b.

(...) RS is located in part in the Humanities, where the focus is on *understanding* of beliefs and behaviours associated with religious groups; and in part in the social sciences, where the onus is on *explanation*. Both, however, assume a non-confessional approach. That is to say, it assumes a methodologically agnostic perspective and is (in theory at least) not concerned with legitimising or defending religion and/or religions, but in the disinterested analysis thereof. (BASR 2021: 10, emphases in the original)

In distinction to that approach, theology is described as 'methodologically theist, that is it assumes the existence of something more-or-less equivalent to the Divine, and its purview is the relationship between humans and the Divine'. (ibid) Therefore, the report concludes that, despite similar subject matter, 'it should be clear that these are not the same subject.' (ibid.)

The long established institutional strength of Theology at universities strikes as a clear parallel to the German situation. In many respects, the small discipline of the Study of Religion (in the sense of Religious Studies) has profited, in one way or another, from participating in this traditional institutional power. In this context, differences between the disciplines are often played down in some silent or not so silent agreement to create win-win situations in the competitive modern university: theology can serve with a long established reputation and residual privileges in the established systems, while the study of religion, with its comparative and global perspective, helps to justify (all) religion-related disciplines - as long as the characteristic differences are played down and the disciplines remain institutionally intertwined. This seems to have been the case with 'the TRS brand':

In short, the TRS brand attempts to defend both subjects, often without proper differentiation, meaning that the unfortunate reality is that RS, which is subject to neither the same advantages (vocational courses and historic institutional power), nor disadvantages (declining public interest), is effectively erased in this attempt. (BASR 2021: 22)

This analysis corresponds to my thesis that *not* defending the independent, critical Study of Religion will result in the disappearance of the discipline. Within this obvious discursive and institutional power struggle which raises the question about which approach to religion will be supported both in the modern university and in social and cultural discourse about religion the hitherto small discipline of the Study of Religion can only survive when its difference to theology and religious approaches is made clear - not only in specialised scientific articles, but also in different social, political and not least educational contexts where a wider public is allowed to understand the difference and its relevance for allowing space for the discussion of religion-related issues in the public sphere. The BASR response concedes: 'It may be that the failure is ours, for failing to differentiate RS's approaches from Theology, and for failing to make the case for the social-scientific non-confessional study of religion in public discourse' (23). However, it also acknowledges that other agents may have a strong interest in playing down the differences between Theology and RS: 'But it also seems that, for some

colleagues outside RS, there are strong political or institutional reasons for not making the distinction - perhaps to address Theology's steeper declining numbers, or to protect confessional study against the non-confessional approaches to RS' (ibid).

This issue is all the more striking at school level, where the differences between theology and RS are frequently discursively completely blurred.

4. The national plan for RE

In the final report *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward. A national plan for RE* by the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE 2018) a differentiation between theological and RS approaches to religion is completely absent - the difference between the approaches is not even mentioned - while the institutional power of theology and religious positions for framing RE is clearly visible already in the foreword where we learn that *The Very Revd Dr John Hall, Dean of Westminster* (clearly marked as a representative of religion on a photograph on which he wears his robe) was chair of the RE commission. In the report, RE is presented both as a field of its own, with its own specialists, and as a multidisciplinary approach. Theology is mentioned only twice in the report, once among the wide range of disciplines that may provide perspectives on worldviews (37) and once in a sentence that deserves further analysis for our question about the differentiation of theology and RS:

While there is much positive and effective activity at local level, not all teachers have equal access to such expertise. If a Higher Education Institution (HEI) that teaches RE, theology or religious studies is present, or the local authority has bought in significant time from an RE adviser, there is more capacity and expertise available to support RE in that locality as compared to those where that expertise is not readily available. (50)

As I read this passage, expertise from any of the three disciplines, RE, theology or RS counts as relevant expertise for RE. The different approaches are not being regarded as decisive in this context. Any of these will do. The differences and incompatibilities between theological and religious-studies approaches seem to be absorbed in RE, and the report makes them fully invisible.

In a large field like RE there is no doubt knowledge produced in different disciplines is relevant for the subject. The crucial question is, however, from which perspective religion is conceptualised and framed in RE. If this is not spelled out clearly, RE will always have some kind of ambiguous character that is open to a wide range of religious and secular interpretations. This becomes relevant when it comes to the right of withdrawal. Unless it is clear whether RE is a religious or a secular subject, it cannot be made compulsory, as this would violate human rights jurisdiction with respect to the right of

freedom of (and from) religion. The factual ambiguity is conceded in the report:

Given the freedoms afforded to schools to design their own curricula, we could not guarantee that every school curriculum nationally would be sufficiently 'objective, critical and pluralistic' to justify ending the right of withdrawal (...). (67)

Therefore, RE cannot be made compulsory. The report discusses that as an inconvenient legal subtlety rather than a principle challenge to the whole conceptualisation of RE. It has a clear vision that, despite the above-mentioned inconsistency - it 'is a subject for all pupils, whatever their own family background and personal beliefs and practices' (CoRE 2018: foreword), but does not fulfil the criteria for making it compulsory - it is *desirable* that all pupils take part in it. Rather than considering how school curricula could be made 'sufficiently "objective, critical and pluralistic" to justify ending the right of withdrawal' (see above, 67), the subject is related to the promotion of 'fundamental British values' including tolerance of different faiths and beliefs (67):

Having said that, there are ways that schools can – and do – manage the right of withdrawal so that parents can make informed decisions and in keeping with the need to promote fundamental British values including tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. The majority of schools (...) invited parents to discuss their request and find out more about the RE curriculum. *Most parents withdrew their requests following these discussions.* (67, emphasis added)

Here, using the right of withdrawal is interpreted as, above all, the result of a misunderstanding of the character of RE. The report does not conceal that it interprets using the right of withdrawal as suspicious of being an expression of a religiously intolerant position:

It may be feasible to develop a code of good practice for managing the right of withdrawal, which may also include the parent declaring that they understand the school's published programme of study *and that they understand the need for tolerance of all faiths and beliefs.* (68, emphasis added)

This is a clear articulation of the suspicion that using the right of withdrawal may indicate an intolerant position.

The report represents the history of the 'nature of RE' (5) as reflecting the change of understandings and social realities from *Religious Instruction* (1944 Education Act), limited to Christianity, to *Religious Education* in the Education Reform Act of 1988, which states that agreed syllabuses 'shall reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (ERA 1988: section 8.3). This charts a move from the special position of the Church of England, which materialised, for

example, in its factual veto in the agreed syllabus conferences, to the new proposed *Religion and Worldviews* subject, an (almost) inclusive subject with a name that, as the report states, 'also removes the ambiguity in the phrase 'Religious Education', which is often wrongly assumed to be about making people more religious' (7). However, despite the removal of 'religious' from the name, the ambiguity of the subject itself is not dispelled. I think that this is particularly problematic if the subject is linked so closely to fundamental ('British') values and to teaching tolerance. Here, a frequently religiously framed narrative of values, identity, cultural heritage and tolerance is presented as if this was the naturally given, largely uncontroversial framework for dealing with these questions - of which no child really should opt out. In the new proposed subject, singling out Christianity is not even necessary any more in order to secure its special position. An extended world religions paradigm secures the prominence of the Christian model and practice of religion as 'common sense' (cf. Cotter and Robertson 2016: 10), given without alternative, preserving, as Masuzawa (2005) has shown, European universalism in the language of pluralism. This appears as (almost) secular, at least as a broad social consensus that only a small minority of radicals may wish to resist.

This fits my concept of small-i-indoctrination, which

involves the presentation of a particular religious model of religion as self-evident and universal, even if it rests mainly on the view and privileges of the established majority religious communities, systematically subordinates 'other' religions discursively by applying the interpretations and paradigms of the prime model religion, and, in many ways, contradicts a secular notion and framing of religions, that one, perhaps, may expect in secular states. (Alberts 2019: 70)

Integrative models of RE that have been developed (often very slowly) out of confessional models frequently retain traces of confessionalism. These may be found at different levels: the aims of the subject, the construction of the subject matter, the organisational framework, teacher education etc. The report clearly acknowledges that human rights issues would emerge when the subject was made compulsory and that some measures would need to be taken in order to make plausible that the subject frames religion and worldviews in a way that ensures the 'objective, critical and pluralistic' approach. (cf. see CoRE 2018: 67) Instead of attempting the latter, this matter is, however, with some discursive twists, simply left open, even if at the cost of making the subject fully compulsory and, thus, still not reaching a small minority of pupils. If this decision is read with the quote from the BASR response to the BA report (above) in mind that 'it also seems that, for some colleagues outside RS, there are strong political or institutional reasons for not making the distinction, (...) to protect confessional study against the non-confessional approaches to RS' (BASR 2021: 23), one may conclude that this has certainly been a successful strategy for RE as well, despite the inclusive school context that, as the human rights issue implies, would need a fully transparent approach. The prominent, apparently self-evident place of theology has been secured for an inclusive subject, secularity being

mentioned in the report merely as subject matter to be studied, but not as framework.

The crucial question for any RE is, however, what kind of knowledge it produces. Is it religious or secular knowledge about religion? The dynamics of knowledge production on religion depend on the way religious content is framed. The differences between and consequences of different ways of framing religion for the general religious or secular character of RE will be described in the next section, in order to establish a model of *critical education about religion (Religionskunde)*.

5. Religious and secular knowledge about religion

Katharina Frank, scholar in the Study of Religion at the University of Zurich, studied, based on empirical classroom research, various forms of communicating knowledge about religion in the integrative obligatory subject *religion and culture* in the canton of Zurich, Switzerland (Frank 2009). She focuses on the question what kind of knowledge about religions is produced in the actual communication in the classroom and developed a typology of different models of teaching and learning about religion in school. The crucial question for an integrative approach is, if pupils acquire religious or secular knowledge in RE. Frank understands 'knowledge', in the tradition of the sociology of knowledge, in a comprehensive sense, including both intellectual and action-related knowledge (see Frank 2015: 46f).

Frank observes correspondences between types in which teachers frame the religious content in RE and the development of the pupils' 'knowledge'. She distinguishes between a narrative, a dogmatic, a life-world and a cultural studies type and finds the following correspondences between the teachers teaching methodology and the mode of the pupils participation:

- (1) In the *narrative type*, religious content is described without framing it. This results in the pupils' participation in religion (open invitation).
- (2) In the *dogmatic type*, religious or secular content is framed in a religiously dogmatic way, leading to guided active participation of the pupils in religion (perspective transfer).
- (3) In the *life-world type*, religious content is framed either in an individualising life-world approach or different types of religious content are framed in a universalising life-world approach. This leads to the pupils' subjective active participation in religion (induced perspective).
- (3) In the *cultural studies type*, religious content is framed in a historical or social studies way or different types of content are framed comparatively. In this type, pupils participate in religion only as observer and change perspectives.

This is, of course, only a very abbreviated description of Franks findings and for details I have to refer the reader to Franks detailed analysis in her book (Frank 2009) or her article where she develops her findings further (Frank

2015). What is decisive, however, are her conclusions about the production of religious and secular knowledge and their implications for the general character of the different types of RE where the narrative type, the dogmatic type, *and* the life-world type result in participation in communicated religion and are, therefore, classified as *religious approaches* ('*religiöser Unterricht*'). Only the cultural studies type, by contrast, results in participation in a secular educational process and is, therefore, classified as a *secular approach* ('*religionskundlicher Unterricht*', see Frank 2015: 51).

Frank was asked to participate in the evaluation of the subject of religion and culture in Zurich and her distinctions became very relevant in the question of what kind of knowledge such a subject actually produces and what needs to be considered for an integrative obligatory subject. Her research is pioneering in making empirically transparent what the different types of teaching about religion involve in terms of the communication of knowledge to the pupils. The distinction between religious and secular knowledge about religion is crucial, not least with respect to the human rights issue and the question of which type of RE may be obligatory. The right of the parents 'to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions' (CoE 1994, article 2 of protocol 1) implies that children are not obliged to take part in RE that takes a religious approach. The European Court of Human Rights requests that states need to take 'sufficient care that information and knowledge included in the curriculum be conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner for the purposes of Article 2 of Protocol No. 1' (ECHR 2007: section 102). In case of the Norwegian KRL subject, the ECHR found that the state had not done that, and adds, interestingly, 'notwithstanding the many laudable legislative purposes stated in connection with the introduction of the KRL subject in the ordinary primary and lower secondary schools' (ibid.). This remark points at a problem that many obligatory RE subjects have: the beautiful rhetoric of generally agreed laudable purposes, such as promoting tolerance and understanding and conveying basic values, etc., to all pupils, covers the epistemological and organisational contradictions of the subject. In the Norwegian case, the obligatory status made it possible to bring that case to court. In contexts where the same problem exists but the subject does not have a legally obligatory status, the issue is more subtle. The technical possibility of opting out is given, but as the character of the subject is obscured and the possibility of opting out is often invisible to parents or undesirable as this is generally interpreted as a disaffirmation of the 'laudable purposes', the subjects become, for most pupils, though not legally, but practically obligatory. This is also an element of what I call 'small-i-indoctrination' (Alberts 2019).

If RE is not to become or include any kind of religious activity, but education where secular knowledge about religion is communicated (i.e. *Religionskunde*), several organisational and content-related issues need to be considered in order to set a suitable agenda (cf. Alberts 2023). Generally, secular education about religion needs to be independent of religious institutions, so that the agenda for both, the conceptualisation of the subject matter as well as the framing of the content are not determined from a religious point of view. This is the main difference to a confessional approach.

Frank has convincingly shown the effects of different framings of the subject matter, and this is, certainly the crucial point. However, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the process begins long before there is some identified content for a lesson. The conceptualisation of the subject matter itself and the question along which understandings of religion and paradigms this is done already sets a particular agenda for RE. The critical Study of Religion in school, therefore, involves a critical conceptualisation of the subject matter which, for example, does not simply start from the world religions paradigm or a life-world approach to religion. Additionally, the framing of the subject matter needs to happen in a way that does not result in a religious approach. The cultural studies type serves, as Frank has shown, this function, as it paves the way, not for participating in religion, but for a secular educational process of (critically) studying religion. This also involves the popular - and seemingly uncontroversial notion of *learning from religion*. As long as, in school contexts, the aim to promote *learning from religion* does not aim to promote *learning from the study of religion* (see Alberts 2008: 320) it will not be critical in a secular educational sense.

Conclusion

Coming back to my theses in the introduction and the question about the place of the critical Study of Religion in universities and schools, I think that my examples have demonstrated that the interpretation of the word 'critical' is decisive in this context. What exactly is the critical Study of Religion? Many scholars and not least the academic associations in the Study of Religion (such as the BASR, DVRW, EASR and IAHR) describe that kind of approach very clearly in programmatic academic articles, introductions to the discipline or statutes of the associations. The question is, however, how critical we are in which contexts and where we perhaps refrain from being critical, for various reasons. I think, the academic Study of Religions needs to demonstrate very clearly both what it is and includes and what it is not and does not include. In addition to the traditional but continuously indispensable distinction from theology, it may, in the modern university, perhaps be equally important to show what the Study of Religions has that other disciplines that also deal with religion as a subject matter, do not have: the critical and systematic reflection about religion as a concept and about the theoretical and methodological consequences of different conceptualisations of religion for various kinds of studies and representations of religion. This kind of approach as well as the knowledge about religion it produces - which stands in stark contrast to intuitive knowledge about religion that appears as something like universal common sense in some contexts - needs to be communicated clearly both at school and university levels. If we already fail to make necessary distinctions at university level, for example, by blurring or downplaying the distinction between theology and religious studies - who else should be the one to communicate this kind of knowledge to society?

As I hope to have shown with the few examples, in school contexts, to the layperson (i.e. to almost all parents and pupils), the precise rules of the game,

the power structures, privileges and interests are often invisible, as they are effectively concealed in downplaying important organisational, structural and content-related aspects of the respective models. This is true for both Germany and Britain. Here, the critical Study of Religion is needed in order to analyse and explain exactly these blind spots. For critical education about religion (*Religionskunde*), the important issue in this respect is the question of perspectivity: on what kind of perspective are both the construction of the subject matter and the framing of the subject matter based? Clear analyses of these matters would enrich the social, political and educational debates much more than joining the choir that praises the laudable intentions of RE in general, even if it is unclear what exactly it includes.

The statuses of the critical Study of Religion at university and schools are interconnected and mutually dependent in various ways, as they are both causes and effects of social change. Promoting the *critical* Study of Religion also beyond university will help to deconstruct the concealment of facts in the public discourse on school RE, that is itself a reason for the weakness and invisibility of the Study of Religion. Unambiguous programmatic statements by the academic associations in the Study of Religion, including, for example the above-mentioned mission statement of the IAHR (IAHR 2022), the clear position of the EASR against the establishment of an 'European Academy of Religion' (Thomassen and Jensen 2017) and clearly RS-based research on the education about religion, for example, within the EASR working group on religion in secular education (EASR 2022a) or the working group on religion and school of the DVRW are important landmarks in this complex field. If the difference to other approaches, the exact rules of the game, and the epistemological presuppositions of the critical Study of Religion are not communicated clearly and uncompromisingly both at university and school levels, its benefits will remain invisible and, perhaps, result in the disappearance of the discipline, despite the social and educational relevance of its approach - and despite the good intentions of strengthening it by profiting from the institutional power of theology and other established structures for short-term aims.

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