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**Conclusion: Human Rights and Religion in Educational Contexts. Foundations and Conceptional Perspectives**

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*Abstract*

*This concluding contribution is meant as an attempt to group several central lines of thought from the discourse documented in this volume and to inquire into viable perspectives on the relationship between human rights and religious education. The contributions collected here have made it clear that the relationship between human rights and religious education can only be determined on the basis of fundamental philosophical, theological and jurisprudential deliberations. In my opinion, five fundamental questions appear to be central for the development of such a basis in regard to gaining a religious pedagogical perspective of human rights.*

1. *What is the relationship between (particular) religious traditions and (universal) human reason? In brief: How do faith and reason relate?*
2. *What is the relationship of the (major world) religions to each other?*
3. *What can religions contribute to society in regard to underpinning, promoting and critically monitoring a human rights culture?*
4. *What can a human rights culture contribute to a constructive and internal further development of the respective religions?*
5. *What contribution can a human rights culture provide to formation and education?*

*After discussion of these five fundamental questions, I will then sketch the consequences for religious education in five theses.*

1. *Education in human rights and religious education – five theses.*

**1. What is the relationship between (individual) religious traditions and (universal, public) human reason? In brief: How do faith and reason relate?**

In his contribution to this volume and in his previous publications, Friedrich Lohmann has made it clear that in recent theological discussions, particularly in Protestant ones, the idea of natural law has again gained considerable significance – and therewith the idea that faith and reason do not contradict each other, but are rather mutually complementary. Already St. Paul emphasized in his theology (in his letter to the Romans in the New Testament) that the pagans, too, had a natural moral consciousness and that at the same time human reason, like humanity as a whole, had to be enlightened and transformed through God’s Holy Spirit. The aim of Christian faith, as is well known, is the universal salvation of all human beings as creatures of God made in his image and likeness. Thus, faith, like reason, lays claim to a universal dimension. In present-day discussion the central insight appears to be that both reason and faith are always affected by imperfection and fallibility, so that continual striving and struggle are needed in order to come closer to the good and the true.

Bernhard Grümme, in his contribution to this volume, stresses that in view of the catastrophes of the 20th century, the conclusion is inescapable that secular ethical ideals of humanity were not successful. That is certainly true and can be taken as a sign of the fallibility of secular reason. But it has to be added that 2000 years of Christian history have also failed to lead to a consistent humanization of mankind which would stand as a testimony to Christian belief: Too many wars and atrocities have been committed in the name of the Christian God. And precisely the human achievement of universal human rights had a long struggle for acceptance in the face of opposition from the Christian churches.

In my opinion, however, this present situation means a special historic opportunity, in that both Christian and modern secular orientations, religious and secular rationalities, have recognized their limitations. With a perspective critical of religion, philosopher Herbert Schnädelbach has in his publications spoken of Christianity grown old with no chances of survival in its traditional form due to its “congenital defects” (Schnädelbach, 2000). Instead, I suggest that we speak of a “late Christianity” as a parallel to “late modernity” – a Christianity that is self-reflecting, that has grown “mature”, if you will, that examines its “birth defects” critically, has learned from its historical errors and draws the consequences of its entanglement in the guilt of abuse of power, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia, etc. In the Protestant tradition we have learnt particularly from Karl Barth and Paul Tillich that the Christian religion, like all religions, is always humanly fallible. The insight that human faith can only speak of God imperfectly and, ultimately, falsely goes all the way back to the philosophy of Plato and was further developed by Christian theology in the movement of “negative theology” (see, for example, Halbmayr & Hoff, 2008). From its innermost self-concept, from its faith in God and its epistemology, the Christian religion remains ever in need of reform and thus open for critical confrontation with secular reason, as well as with other religions and worldviews. Indeed, precisely the topic of human rights provides an object lesson or paradigm for the realization that Christianity, again and again, is apparently dependent on the “external prophecy”[[1]](#footnote-1) of secular reason in order to recognize its true essence. In the basic ideas of human dignity and the inalienable rights and freedoms granted every human being “by nature”, Christian theology has discovered, after a long learning process, a reflection of central precepts of faith, such as the belief that man is made in the image of God.

The self-reflective knowledge of the limitations of modernity, in turn, and therewith of secular reason, has been pointed out especially by Jürgen Habermas multiple times – as demonstrated at greater length in my opening contribution to this volume. It has become the main motivation for Habermas to advocate for philosophy an openness to learn from religious traditions and positions.

As a conclusion, I see plausible arguments for the thesis that in late modernity and in late Christianity secular reason and religious reason have in a new manner become open for each other and willing to learn from one another. They can complement each other in a meaningful way. This also goes for dialogue on, and the further development of, human rights.

**2. What is the relationship of the (major world) religions to each other?**

What is valid for the relationship between faith and reason is similarly valid for the relationship between the religions. Both the insight of imperfection and fallibility of one’s own religion,as well as the potential enrichment of other religions prompts a search in pluralism for pathways between relativism and fundamentalism. Over the past decades several models of thought have been suggested in order to theologically define a productive interrelationship between the world religions (as, for instance, analyzed in the dissertation of Lucas Grassal, 2013). Such approaches suggest that the conviction of truth of one’s own faith need not be surrendered, but at the same time one should be open for the capacity for truth of other religions. From an inner Christian perspective, both the Catholic and the Protestant Churches have found theological approaches from which they can “recognize a ray of truth […] which enlightens all men and women (Nostra Aetate, Second Vatican Council) and from which the teachings of other religions are perceivable and interpretable as the “externally prophetic” voice of God (see on “external prophecy” Mette, 1995). A recent official document passed by the Council of the Protestant Churches in Germany (EKD) emphasizes that

“wherever people face the truth, the promise applies to them that God’s Spirit blows where he wills. This is the hope of Christians not only for themselves but beyond all church walls and religious borders. […] Therefore the Protestant Church acknowledges that in other forms of religion, too, convincing expressions of human self-understanding, authentic forms of spirituality and responsible shapes of ethical convictions can be found.” (Kirchenamt der EKD, 2015, 30).

As outlined in the opening chapter of this volume, it is such mutual respect of religions for each other that can be viewed as a constructive response to the challenge of human rights. The religions at least of the western world, and here in particular the Christian churches and denominations, must first realize that secular thought on human dignity and on human rights arose in the 17th and 18th centuries as a reaction to the wars of religion and religiously motivated persecutions. Although both major churches in Germany and other religions, above all the Baha’i religion, have found their way to an explicit affirmation of human rights, the unrestricted validity of human rights continues to be controversial in the Orthodox Churches, for example, as well as in large sectors of Islam and Judaism. The challenge for religions of determining their relationship to one another in the sense of peaceful coexistence originates, above all, – as Heiner Bielefeldt has pointed out in his contribution to this volume – in the human right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. It is both disgraceful and deeply deplorable that this right to freedom is still called into question, not only by national powers, but also by religious communities, and that in part it has to be enforced against their opposition.

**3. What can religions contribute to society in regard to underpinning, promoting and critically monitoring a human rights culture?**

In the philosophical discussion of human rights, as substantially delineated and shaped by Heiner Bielefeldt (cf. Bielefeldt, 1998) and briefly sketched in the opening chapter of this volume, it seems interesting to my view that similar tendencies are to be found in both of the most influential social philosophers of the last 50 years, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. From what originally began as a strongly secular and rationally oriented theory of society and justice, both come to the conclusion that the different groupings of a democratic society, also the religious groupings, should come to an agreement on certain basic principles through freedom of communication. As shown, the concepts of “overlapping consensus” between comprehensive doctrines (Rawls) and of “complementary learning processes” of religious and non-religious citizens (Habermas) mirror the, so to speak, ‘religious turns’ in both Rawls and Habermas – while they both retained their agnostic positions. Their plea for a secular, but not secularistic legal and political foundation of modern pluralistic societies finds it parallels in the jurisprudential discourse in countries such as the United States and Germany. In this understanding, the secularity of state and law is not to be seen as a secular position of isolation from religion, but rather as an “expression of respect for freedom of religion and belief” (Bielefeldt, 2011, p. 154). In this sense the principle of “respectful non-identification” (Ibid) of the state with religious communities, as well as other ideological groups is followed, which still allows for constructive co-operation between state institutions and religious bodies.

On this basis, religions can participate in the discussion and promotion of human rights through a mutually enriching, intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In this connection I would like to remind us of Bielefeldt’s helpful delineation of the history of human rights as “*an open learning process*”. In the historical learning process which led to the development of human rights, individuals from different cultures, worldviews and religions all made their contribution. And this conflict-driven learning process remains incomplete and open and depends on the further participation of people from different cultures, worldviews and religions (cf. Bielefeldt, 2007; 2009).

Central for this learning process is also the insight that all cultures, worldviews and religions are confronted at times with shocking and devastating forms of violation of human rights. Reinhold Boschki rightly emphasizes in his contribution to this volume that the decisive impulses for the establishment of human rights came about through the catastrophic experiences of the two World Wars, and that the *culture of remembrance of traumatic violence*, which is especially strongly rooted in the Jewish tradition, has contributed to the emergence of a human rights ethic (see also Zehavit Gross’ contribution in this volume). The estimation that religious perspectives can be particularly helpful in the implementation of a human rights culture has recently, apart from Habermas, been prominently pointed out by Hans Joas (Joas, 2013).

It has been contended by several authors in this volume, that the religious instruction in religious communities, but even more public forms of religious education, especially at public schools, can make substantial contributions to developing a human rights culture. These contributions are mainly threefold: Religious education a) helps religious people to develop an understanding of their religion that is compatible with a human rights culture; b) it helps religious and non-religious people to develop respect and openness for each other; c) it teaches religious values that support and strengthen human rights values.

**4. What can a culture of human rights contribute to the constructive further internal development of the respective world religions?**

As mentioned above, religions themselves have developed further through the learning process involved in human rights discourse and will continue to do so. For instance, the two major churches have learned to understand the idea of human rights as a translation of central basic truths of the Christian faith and therewith have discovered the human rights’ Judaeo-Christian roots. In my view the opportunity for religions in their grappling with human rights lies precisely in the rediscovery of their own, perhaps neglected, but nevertheless significant lines of tradition, as is apparently the case with current Islamic theology. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, in her contribution to this volume, brings this to hopeful attention.

Perhaps it is precisely the human rights discourse that can help all those committed to interreligious dialogue maintain a realistic and modest stance: John Rawls’ fundamental idea, as pointed out in the opening chapter, was that political concepts such as human rights constitute an “overlapping consensus” merely in *central fundamental principles and values* and do not demand agreement on a comprehensive doctrine or worldview. Similarly, interreligious dialogue should restrict its goals to a – bilateral or multilateral – overlapping consensus in basic principles and values and should not aim at something like a common ethos of all great religions, let alone at religious homogeneity. Rather, peaceful coexistence of all religions is possible, if one can agree on fundamental principles, such as respect and tolerance for other religions and worldviews, and is prepared to leave the final answer on the last truths – salvation and damnation – to a merciful God.

The hopeful initiatives reported by Johannes Lähnemann in his contribution to this volume should be viewed in this sense: The *World Conference of Religions for Peace* (since 1970; now: *Religions for Peace/RfP*) and the principles of a Global Ethic of the World’s Religions approved by the World Parliament of Religions in 1993 and endorsed by RfP in Kyoto 2007 see themselves explicitly as the ethical foundation of human rights based on the ethical traditions of the world religions (www.global-ethic-now.de), while not excluding nonreligious ethical foundations. Since 1995, the Global Ethic Foundation has developed many projects for interreligious and ethical learning (cf. Lähnemann, 1995).

**5. What can a culture of human rights contribute to education and formation?**

It is clear that the worldwide establishment of human rights is dependent on education in a fundamental way. It is not just a matter of having to find democratic majorities to be able to anchor human rights in national declarations and laws – and even this already requires well-educated, democratically minded citizens, both male and female. It is still more important that the values and norms on which human rights are based be affirmed by the people of a country and that such affirmation be repeated again and again from generation to generation as a free and conscious act. Even when human rights have been successfully anchored in a society, the following generations have to be brought to subjective acquisition of human rights values through their own conviction in order to secure their validity and further development. And in addition, the insight has to be stimulated that human rights are necessary and meaningful as *legally binding and enforceable rights* in order to preserve humanity from endangerment through the negative aspects of human power and human fallibility.

This double task is already perceptible in the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in which the UN states explain their declaration:

**“[…] the General Assembly proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common** standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The action plan of the UN on education in human rights from 2006 can also be understood in this sense, in its programmatic statement:

“Human rights education can be defined as education, training and information aimed at building a universal culture of human rights. A comprehensive education in human rights not only provides knowledge about human rights and the mechanisms that protect them, but also imparts the skills needed to promote, defend and apply human rights in daily life. Human rights education fosters the attitudes and behaviours needed to uphold human rights for all members of society. […] Both what is taught and the way in which it is taught should reflect human rights values, encourage participation and foster a learning environment free from want and fear.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Clearly the UN is not only concerned with making human rights known and declaring their validity. Rather their goal is to create a worldwide “culture of human rights”. Although it is not mentioned explicitly, the concept of Richard Rorty seems to have been an influence here, according to which more than merely rational philosophical argumentation is necessary in order to help establish human rights (cf. Rorty, 1993; see also Weber, 2013, Chap. 2). For Rorty, unlike Rawls or Habermas, the *cultivation of empathy* through experienced transcultural solidarity plays a very decisive role in fostering a culture of human rights – and not just ensuring its legal status. In this spirit the Action Plan also calls for the fostering of the attitudes and behaviors needed for such a culture of human rights. Indeed, as becomes apparent in the course of the paper, the goal of education in human rights is ultimately the education of the whole human personality. As such it aims to transform education as a whole (for more on this, see Pirner, 2013).

The latter impulse, to view the orientation towards human rights as the core of education in general, can, in my opinion, practically be understood as a modern reformulation of the classical ideal of education – and, by the way, of a Christian understanding of education as well. In its sense education must first and foremost educate people as human beings and thus serve human development. Preparation for the demands of society and its economy are secondary. A strong orientation of our school education towards human rights and therewith towards a correspondence to the human person could perhaps provide a healthy counterweight to the present performance orientation brought to bear by PISA and other international school achievement studies. The present discussion on inclusion in our schools, which was stimulated through the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, offers such an opportunity (cf Pirner, 2015). The demand that education should be oriented towards the “*The measurements of humanness*” [*Maße des Menschlichen*] is also a programmatic demand of the German Protestant Churches (EKD) in a Memorandum published in 2003 (Kirchenamt der EKD, 2003).

**6. Human rights and religious education** **– Five Theses**

Preliminary remark: I begin with the premise that the relationship between religious education and human rights, much like the relationship between the religions and human rights, should be viewed as a fundamentally dialectal and mutual relationship. Religious education fosters a culture of human rights and is simultaneously subject to critical evaluation on the basis of its standards – a process which again serves for the advancement of education and at the same time strengthens religion as well as religious education. This is particularly true for public religious education in nursery schools, child day care, schools, media and adult education, but basically no less so for religious education and socialization in the family and community.

*1. Religious education in families, communities and in public contributes significantly to the support of children, adolescents and adults in their competence to perceive their human right to religious freedom.*

As Friedrich Schweitzer argues in his contribution to this volume, the perception of the basic right to freedom of religion is inconceivable without religious education. The right to religious education is ultimately a consequence of both the human right to freedom of religion, as well as the human right to education. The right to religious education becomes ever more important in a human rights-based pluralistic society, because in such a society, reflective and high-quality religious education is necessary a) to make informed personal choices in religious matters, b) to develop an understanding of one’s own religion or worldview that is compatible with the right to freedom of religion and belief as well as with other human rights, and c) to be able to competently participate in public discourse on religious issues.

*2. Recognition of religious freedom for all men and women is at the same time a central criterion for the quality of religious education, particularly in the public realm. It is honored in an exemplary way by interreligious education.*

Religious education today only does justice to its mandate, if it not only provides an introduction into the beliefs of one religion, but at the same time fosters understanding of the legitimacy of other religions and worldviews. This takes place above all when information is provided on other religions and worldviews in a way that is fair and non-polemic, that offers not only the possibility of learning from them, but ultimately even the freedom to choose them as one’s own personal creed. In terms of a distinction coming from the British context I understand interreligious education as a combination of *learning about religion* and *learning from religion*, which by the way is characteristic, for example, for German Religious Education at public schools (RE), too. As a rule in Germany we naturally proceed from the assumption that also students who are nonbelievers or subscribe to other beliefs should be able to profit from Protestant or Catholic RE without our trying to proselytize or convert them. In a similar manner, for instance, Protestant students in Protestant RE classes can also learn something beneficial from concerning themselves with Islam or Buddhism. Both major churches in Germany emphasize in this respect that RE in public schools is meant to help the student develop *a free and independent choice* in matters of faith (cf. Sekretariat der DBK, 2005; Kirchenamt der EKD, 1994, p. 4).

Aiming at *learning from religion* also means that RE teachers at German public schools have already long been providing such “translations” as have been called for in the discourse of social and human rights ethics (see the opening chapter): Religious statements of faith are didactically treated in such a way that they can be approached by nonbelievers and those of other beliefs. RE teachers offer “translations” of specific religious perspectives into secular perspectives or those of other religions, and they introduce their students into the particular language of a religion so that they are able to make sense of it and “translate” some of its ideas into their own views, languages and life-worlds.

For *public* religious education, that is to say, for RE in public schools, respect for the religious freedom of all should be a hard criterion: only religious communities that subscribe to this freedom right can claim the right to participate in shaping and developing RE as a school subject – or even, as in most German federal states, claim to have their own confessional RE established at public schools.

However, I would like to advocate that freedom of religion also be applied to religious education and instruction in the family and community and, in these fields, be understood as an *internal criterion of quality*. Here, too, the relationship to other religions and worldviews cannot be excluded. Parents would do well, in spite of their legitimate advocacy in favor of passing on their own religious orientation, to allow their children the freedom to choose their own path and their own position in matters of faith. Religious education through force or conscious manipulation contradicts both the understanding of faith by the major world religions and the human right to religious freedom – and as a rule it no longer works in an open and pluralistic society anyway.

*3. The goals and objectives in public religious education as a whole are determined by standards of the religious traditions represented as well as by educational criteria that correspond to the basic values of our constitutional law and therewith of human rights. In a wide sense religious education thus contributes to a culture of human rights.*

RE in schools, as one central location of public religious education in most countries, rightly sees itself clearly as an exemplary case of *humane education* in schools, i.e. its central goal is the development of the whole person of the student, of personal growth, of support for the search for meaning and orientation in life, of social and ethical learning against a horizon of pluralism in religious beliefs and worldviews. In this manner RE in schools reveals certain convergences with the basic goals of education in human rights.

Conversely it can be asserted that only those religious and philosophical communities should have the right to participate in RE at public schools or to run their own state-recognized private schools when their central convictions are compatible with the fundamental values of constitutional law and human rights.

*4. Religious education should address human rights more strongly than up to the present. In this endeavor it should take a conscious and explicit stance in the context of the worldwide intercultural learning process of human rights and contribute to political consciousness.*

Addressing human rights in the context of the worldwide, intercultural human rights learning process means, among other things, that for example Christian religious education should not make an exclusive Christian claim to the foundation or interpretation of human rights. The present curricula in Germany, for example, still contain a dominance of Christian teaching and interpretation of the dignity of man and human rights (see Pirner, 2013 for more detail). In my opinion they must be supplemented by conveying the insight that non-Christian and nonreligious justifications and interpretations of human rights have their own validity.

The other main task of religious education is to be seen in making human rights understandable, as well, as rights that have to be *politically enforced* and endorsable. This raises the critical question of whether the academic discourse on religious education has sufficiently perceived the political dimension and responsibility of RE over the past thirty years. For the German context, Thomas Schlag and Bernhard Grümme have called attention to this deficit most recently and have demanded the inevitable limitations of religious and political education be more strongly acknowledged and tackled conceptually (cf. Grümme, 2009; Schlag, 2010; see also their contributions in this volume). In this sense there should be a demand for stronger attention to the political dimension of human rights in religious educational processes.

*5. The treatment of human rights in religious education has positive repercussions for the religious communities.*

In places of religious education, through the teaching and learning of religious and non-religious individuals also religions – as communities and institutions – can learn. The Memorandum on Religious Education by the Protestant Churches of Germany of 1994 offers a particularly felicitous formulation for RE at public schools: “In the teaching context of public schools Religious Education *puts to the test the capacity of the Christian faith in society for communication, tolerance and dialogue as a contribution for the benefit of all*” (Kirchenamt der EKD, p. 21). Through such learning based on open dialogue religious education and education in human rights can go hand in hand. Evidence from Germany and many other countries shows that religions engaging in public religious education will not remain unchanged, but will receive valuable impulses for their further development.

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1. “External prophecy” means a kind of speech that comes from without one’s own religion, but is still recognized as the word of God. The phenomenon goes back to the Hebrew Bible where, for example, God is reported to have used Abimelech, King of Gerar, to remind Abraham of his duty against God. See on the notion of “external prophecy” Mette, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, online at: <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. UNESCO / OHCHR (ed.) (2006). *Plan of Action. World Programme for Human Rights Education*. First Phase, 1. Online at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001478/147853e.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)