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Interreligious Textbook Research and Development: A Proposal for Standards¹

The **importance of textbook research** – even in the age of audio-visual media – lies in the fact that school textbooks pass on fundamental knowledge to the younger generation: selected, methodologically prepared texts (historical and religious sources, stimulus texts, material for committing to memory), key themes, pictures, suggestions. In a situation of limited specialist training for teachers, textbooks often “teach the teachers” and play a substantial role in lesson planning.

Interreligious textbook research is of particular relevance in the face of the sweeping generalizations, prejudice and stereotypes regarding other religions and cultures (“Islam is like this” – “The West is like that”) that were, and still are, to be found in school textbooks. They are not infrequently reinforced by the media and can easily be misused for political ends. In the tension between a “Clash of Civilisations” and the “Dialogue among Civilisations” that is needed, school textbooks have an important task.² In this respect, we look at cultures not as fixed entities. Differentiations and changes in the different beliefs and in different regions are to be taken seriously. Based on this understanding and the experience of the research project “The representation of Christianity in textbooks of countries with an Islamic tradition”³ we propose below a set of “Standards” for interreligious school textbook development as possible guidelines for author teams and publishers, for education authorities and curriculum planners. The Standards show how interreligious issues should be handled in curriculum and textbook design.⁴

¹ The standards are elaborated in cooperation with Musa Al Munaizel/Amman, Dr. Patrick Bartsch/Bamberg, Prof. Dr. Harry Harun Behr/Erlangen-Nürnberg, Dr. Saeid Edalatnejad/Teheran, Prof. Dr. Klaus Hock/Rostock, Dr. Werner Haußmann/Erlangen-Nürnberg, Prof. Dr. Christoffel Lombard/Kapstadt, Prof. Dr. Manfred Pirner/Erlangen-Nürnberg, Prof. Dr. Wolfram Reiss/Wien, Dr. John Taylor/Genf, Prof. Dr. Cemal Tosun/Ankara, Dr. Georg Tsakalidis/Kosani-Griechenland, Dr. Frank van der Velden/Kairo.

² Cf. K. Hock/J. Lähnemann: Schulbuchforschung interreligiös – auf dem Weg zu besserem gegenseitigen Verstehen. In: J. Lähnemann (Ed.): *Bewahrung – Entwicklung – Versöhnung. Religiöse Erziehung in globaler Verantwortung. Referate und Ergebnisse des Nürnberger Forums 2003.* Hamburg 2005. = *Pädagogische Beiträge zur Kulturbegegnung* Bd. 23, S. 380-398, 394.

³ K. Hock/J. Lähnemann (Ed.): *Die Darstellung des Christentums in Schulbüchern islamisch geprägter Länder.* Hamburg 2005.

I. W. Reiss: *Ägypten und Palästina.* = *Pädagogische Beiträge zur Kulturbegegnung* Bd. 21.

II. P. Bartsch: *Türkei und Iran.* = *Pädagogische Beiträge zur Kulturbegegnung* Bd. 22.

Cf. *Christianity in Islamic Textbooks.* *Panorama* 16 (2004/2005), 105-119

K. Hock/ J. Lähnemann/ W. Reiss: *Schulbuchforschung im Dialog. Das Christentum in Schulbüchern islamisch geprägter Länder.* Frankfurt 2006. = *Beiheft der Zeitschrift für Mission* 5.

⁴ These standards are the result of an interreligious and international process of consultation. In spite of the multiple levels recognized in this process, not all possible settings could be taken in account.

To achieve this we envisage issues and tasks under eight headings:

- 1) an authentic, professionally sound portrayal of the religions,
- 2) developing a dialogue orientated interpretation of religion and belief,
- 3) portraying the religions and their importance in the lives of real people,
- 4) how history is to be handled,
- 5) dealing with religions' cultural heritage and their contextuality,
- 6) the controversial issue of attitudes to the phenomenon of mission, to religious freedom and tolerance,
- 7) mutual understanding in the field of ethics,
- 8) the life conditions of the students and their relevance for religious learning and
- 9) pedagogical and media didactic approaches which accept the students as independent partners in the learning processes.

First we summarise the need for each heading and the tasks involved; we then describe the respective problem areas, and finally we set out the Standards to be achieved.⁵

1. Portraying the religions in an authentic, professionally sound way

1.1 Real dialogue requires that a religion should be portrayed through understanding of self rather than understanding of the other. But also a serious critical view from outside can be helpful. Distorted images and difficult prejudices can be overcome through a pedagogy that is pluralist and presents multiple views for example between an author and a practitioner of the faith. Contradictions arising between self-understanding and understanding the other should be examined and the underlying assumptions explored.

1.2 One problem is that religious communities have often seen themselves, or still see themselves, as competitors in the claim to exclusive truth; or they exist side by side and ignore each other. Also, textbook authors sometimes lack the training and academic qualifications necessary for a sound understanding of the different religions. Furthermore, interreligious topics are rarely given enough space within the syllabus.

1.3 For this **Standard** textbook authors should have access to professionally sound sources from the religions in question, backed up by reliable religious scholarship. Care should be taken to consider the religious communities in the round; not through individual unconnected characteristics, but through their religious beliefs, fundamental views on the coherence of life, their teachings, rituals, social structures and ethics.

Therefore, the standards cannot directly be brought to practice. They need to be reflected regarding the specific contexts and practical conditions.

⁵ For positive examples in new textbooks cf. the textbook research contributions of the IXth Nuremberg Forum – in J. Lähnemann (ed.): *Visionen wahr machen. Interreligiöse Bildung auf dem Prüfstand*. Hamburg 2007, 490-513. Klaus Hock presents in his contribution an overview about the constructive elements in different countries with a Muslim Majority.

However, differences within a religious tradition should be addressed accurately and sensitively.

Authenticity has an additional meaning: that expert adherents of each religion are actively involved in the process of correcting, supplementing, even writing. This calls for interreligious and interdisciplinary cooperation for which religious studies and educational sciences are of special relevance.

Besides this there should be professionally sound interdisciplinary collaboration, and coordination between religious education, moral education and other subjects (history, geography and social sciences, musical and language teaching ...) whose textbooks touch religious content. A task of this complexity calls for a careful division of labour among the subject areas, a clear overall didactic plan reflecting current research into teaching and learning with special consideration to the continuity of learning from one age group to the next aiming at the competence to be able to deal with different world views.

2. Developing a dialogue orientated interpretation of religion and belief

2.1 An accurate presentation of the beliefs of others is only possible if the interpretation of their core teachings is based on discussion with theologians and educators of the other religions. The effort must be made to set out what is binding in the beliefs of different religions, what differs in emphasis but is not necessarily controversial, and what after all is contradictory and incompatible.

2.2 The challenge here, especially from a religious education point of view, is that there is no long tradition or experience of exchanging views on religious beliefs. This difficulty is compounded by the traditional structural relationship, especially between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, whereby younger religions cast the older in their own mould (causing thereby a sense of expropriation and misunderstanding). The older religions, meanwhile, perceive the younger to have distorted their own religious convictions. In the religions of south-east Asia, Hinduism and Buddhism are often a source of popular topics (Yoga, Dalai Lama ...) but they are rarely considered in the overall context of the particular religious tradition.

2.3 Here the **Standard** must be to link the writing of school textbooks to the fundamental work of theological reflection in the religions as well as to religious studies research and encouragement to explore original texts.

This requires a challenging core conceptual framework for the religions in which textbook writers participate without undue obstacles to comprehension. The educational task is thus accepted as a valid component of, and is embedded in, theological and religious studies work. Interpreting the fundamental texts and traditions of other religions is a way of engaging openly with the content of other religious traditions. The aim

should be to think in terms of interconnection (Karl-Josef Kuschel⁶), not separation, nor unilateral confrontation or harmonisation. In this way what unifies, or differs in emphasis or is contradictory, becomes apparent; as do mutual influences and stimuli. To present points of view which one does not share respectfully and in their contexts is especially challenging (for example, the view of Jesus in the New Testament tradition and in the Qur'an, or the world view in Judaism, Christianity and Islam compared with Buddhism and Hinduism).

3. Portraying the religions and their importance in the lives of real people

3.1 Religions cannot be comprehended solely through their teachings, traditions, rituals and aesthetic forms of expression. Their true meaning lies in their impact on the lives of real, ordinary people in a variety of cultural contexts especially in the country where a textbook is to be published. (For example, how do Hindus celebrate Holi in England? What does the Sabbath mean in the everyday life of a liberal American Jew? Or of a woman who is an orthodox Israeli Jew? How do they experience the Sabbath; what interpretations from Jewish tradition are important or helpful to them?)

3.2 Many textbooks are dominated by a view of religion from an external, objective viewpoint. Even self-portrayals may adhere to a descriptive, theologically normative level. Just what impact religion actually has (which can be in tension with what it "ought to have" in the opinion of a religion's theologians and experts) on subjective experiences, on coping with life's problems, on the meaning and experience of happiness in the lives of "normal", ordinary people, is not adequately explained.

3.3 This **Standard** should illustrate the "Sitz im Leben" (the sociological setting) of a religion or its components through vivid, concrete examples of real, average – preferably young – people.⁷ In this way individual differences can be seen, as well as the diversity of ways in which a religion is practised. This would counteract the difficult issue of textbooks which portray religion as a fixed and rigid structure, incapable of renewal or change.

4. Conveying a differentiated view of history

4.1 A special challenge for school textbook writers is the two-way perception of how the religions developed historically. Traditionally, textbooks have concentrated largely on the history of social tensions, selecting dates and events from the troubled periods

⁶ K.-J. Kuschel: *Juden – Christen – Muslime. Herkunft und Zukunft*. Düsseldorf (Patmos) 2007.

⁷ The principle of "personalization" can be helpful: using ideal-typical figures from other faiths in order to illuminate the different self-understandings found there, thus establishing a meeting-point which helps pupils to grasp what the lesson is all about. Cf. W. Haußmann: 'Walking in other People's Moccasins'? Openness to other religions in confessional religious education: possibilities and limits. *BJRE* Volume 13 No 2 Spring 1993.

of encounter between the religions and their political and social legacy. By contrast, the history of cross-fertilisation and cultural exchange receives scant attention, and migration can be a fascinating context for study of differences and continuities. Successful examples taken from history can inspire alternative views of the past and the present.

4.2 One's own perception of history, often associated with accusations and insinuations, frequently legitimises a sense of superiority of one religion over others. The self-identity of religious communities and denominations is often sustained by the exaggeration of historical slights and the celebration of "victories", especially where ethnic identity was, and is, part of this. In many fields a critical analysis of the historical constructions is in its infancy and far from achieving wide currency. Yet students can have a sense of being part of history, including a global dimension of history.

4.3 This **Standard** should allow the cultural achievements and cross-fertilisation of the religions to be duly acknowledged, without ignoring the history of conflict ("the Crusades", "the Turks at the Gates of Vienna"). For this sources should be used with great care, and views accommodate a shift in perspective.⁸ Writing teams should consult historians from the religious communities as well as secular historians in order to avoid sweeping historical generalisations, too often the tinder that has ignited new conflicts. In this way a living and differentiated view of history can emerge.

5. Taking account of the cultural heritage and contextuality of the religious communities

5.1 Religions are more than a teaching edifice. They represent living greatness – with their traditions of worship, their prayers, meditations, educational and pastoral work and, not least, their aesthetic forms of expression: music, theatre, dance, and performing arts. They have shaped philosophical traditions of thought, with the result that it was the Jewish and Islamic, the Classical and Christian heritage that laid the foundations of Western civilisation.

5.2 School textbooks have hitherto – with some exceptions – largely ignored the cultural traditions of other religions. This is often due to their minority status, but also to the derogatory view taken, both historically and ideologically, of other religious communities.⁹ Yet the contribution made by the different religious cultures to the social structures of individual countries is important.

⁸ Cf. Hj. Biener: Herausforderungen zu einer multiperspektivischen Schulbucharbeit. Eine exemplarische Analyse am Beispiel der Berücksichtigung des Islam in Religions-, Ethik- und Geschichtsbüchern. Hamburg 2007. = Pädagogische Beiträge zur Kulturbegegnung Bd. 25.

⁹ While European textbooks do at least occasionally refer to the culture of Islamic Andalusia, rarely mentioned is that of the Orthodox and Ancient Near Eastern churches.

5.3 For this **Standard** textbooks should incorporate the formative cultural and social effects of the different religions, especially of a country's own minorities. This includes perceptions of the life of faith and spiritual forms of expression and their relevance to the direction of one's life; also awareness of education and science and of social and charitable activities.

6. Dealing openly with the topical issues of mission, tolerance and interreligious dialogue

6.1 "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions", "No peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions" – these principles formulated by Hans Küng present a huge educational challenge affecting all, including the religions, in our globalised world. Given religious claims of absolute truth and sense of mission, it cannot be taken for granted that they will come about. For a belief in mission is the premise on which religions crossed geographical boundaries. When a comprehensive message of salvation is part of religious conviction, the urge is that it should be universal. It would be dishonest to omit this from discussions of the religions. The right to bear witness to, and canvass for, one's faith is as much part of positive religious freedom as the principle that this must be without any kind of pressure or dishonest influence.

Regional and global activity among the religions includes an increase in working together for peace and social justice across religious boundaries, and evaluating this for educational purposes should follow.

6.2 In previous textbook analyses mission has proved a particularly sensitive theme in the way it is portrayed. In the Islamic world, but also on the Indian subcontinent, mission is widely (and simplifyingly) seen as the traumatic legacy of the colonial era, resulting in a negative portrayal of, and strong warnings against, Christian missionary activity. Christian cultural establishments in particular were accused of dishonest attempts to gain converts.¹⁰ Islam, on the other hand, has often – since its rapid expansion in early centuries – been accused of a basic aggressiveness. The fact that it can demonstrate a long history of relative tolerance and the nurture of philosophical cultural traditions was largely disregarded.

So far the history – albeit of recent date – of work towards understanding and peace among the religions has yet to be reflected in more than a few textbooks.

6.3 For this **Standard**, future textbooks, as well as describing the religions' different messages of salvation, should contain the history of interreligious dialogue and inter-

¹⁰ It should be recognised that the great missionary societies in the west have long since been pioneers of open religious dialogue, advocates for indigenous cultures and promoters, in social or educational terms, of those bodies which reject proselytising (that is, using dishonest means to convert others to one's own faith).

religious encounter, the groundbreaking signs and declarations.¹¹ There are the prayers for peace in Assisi or on Mount Hiei in Japan, the “Parliament of the World’s Religions” and its Declaration Towards a Global Ethic (1993), the international movement “Religions for Peace”, and last but not least, local initiatives such as meeting centres, dialogue weeks, prayers and meditations for peace. Any of these may serve as examples in school textbooks.

7. Finding common ground in ethics

7.1 That the different religions have much in common in their fundamental ethics is shown particularly clearly in the Global Ethic Project initiated by Hans Küng. At the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1993 a declaration was signed by all major religious leaders affirming the precept of the Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have others do unto you”) and four irrevocable directives taken from the four ethical commandments of the Decalogue and the obligations undertaken voluntarily by a lay Buddhist: non-violence, solidarity, truthfulness and partnership.¹² These fundamental convictions do not constitute a uniform ethic. They have to be discussed and concretised in different contexts and in exchange with non-religious humanistic positions.

7.2 The declaration for a global ethic has been studied widely from Germany to Iran but appears in only a few European textbooks. But the educational initiatives and resources of the Global Ethic Foundation bear impressive testimony to how learning together in an interreligious and collaborative pedagogy can address ethical issues in a nuanced, up-to-date way.

7.3 This **Standard** should aim to provide school textbooks with the core ethical beliefs common to the religions – while respecting the different foundations. The declaration for a global ethic would be a helpful guide here because the ethical commandments of the Decalogue and the lay Buddhist obligations are expressed as positive aspirations. They also extend beyond the individual, addressing aspects of society, ecology and communication.¹³

¹¹ One measure, and not only for Christians and Muslims, was provided by the Chambésy Declaration by the World Council of Churches in 1976. This states that, “Muslims as much as Christians have an absolute right to persuade and to be persuaded, to live by their faith, and to organise their religious life in accordance with their religious duties and principles”. (It was endorsed at a meeting with the World Muslim Congress in Colombo 1982). The present day dialogue is inspired by the Amman Interfaith message (<http://ammanmessage.com>) and the letter of 138 Muslim representatives to Christian leaders of 13.07.2007 (www.acommonword.com).

¹² H. Küng; K.-J. Kuschel (Ed.): *A Global Ethic. The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions*. London 1993.

¹³ These are the four commitments 1) to a culture of non-violence and respect for all life (not only “You shall not kill”); 2) to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order (not just “You shall not steal”); 3) to a culture of tolerance and truthfulness (not just “You shall not bear false witness”);

8. The life conditions of the students and their relevance for religious learning

8.1 In schools as well as in society, there is no longer confessional homogeneity – not only in European countries. Children and youth are growing up in an environment which is plural in religious matters and in matters of world views. But nevertheless they all have the fundamental questions of life of which religions and world views are the predominant agents – the questions of life and death, of the central meaning of life, of justice and injustice, of overcoming sorrow and trouble. Teachers should be able to find out and recognize the situation and the questions of the students in their specific living context: What do I know about their upbringing, their experiences, needs, wishes, questions? It is a challenge for textbook writers to take this dimension seriously and to give impulses for it to the teachers.

8.2 In textbook tradition, it is still largely a deficit that the children's fundamental questions are mostly not taken as seriously as they should – even where intercultural education is intended. Thus the plurality as well as the individuality of the students is not properly recognized.

8.3 It should be a **standard** for textbooks writers to take the lead from children and adolescents with their interests, their searching for guidance, for meaning in life, belief and responsibility of behaviour. Encounter with the world of the religions should promote a culture of questioning among the students, fostering their curiosity, learning about symbols, empathy, but also their ability to think critically and with discrimination. Many of the central interpretations for life are found in the world's religions; leading figures as role models, stories, pictures, rituals and ceremonies and social activities – all are capable of vivid, stimulating presentation in textbooks. As far as possible textbooks should also deal with the “religion of children and young people”; in other words, students should be shown young people with whom they can identify.

9. Portraying religions vividly and age-appropriately

9.1 Since we began our school textbook research, the didactic and methodological potential in education of active, structured learning has aroused international interest. Only in the past ten years have these learning processes on the topic of the religions really taken off in Germany. Thirty years ago the topic was virtually confined to the final stage of the Gymnasium (upper secondary school). Now the topic is “debordered” by handling the questions according to age group, debordered through cognitive and existential activity and debordered through multiperspectivity already in the primary school. Many ideas have come from religious education practice in Great Britain which

4) to a culture of partnership and equal rights between men and women (not just “You shall not commit adultery”). These directives should not be seen as a fixed codex; they should be the start for a learning process which inspires responsible action in personal as well as in social life.

made early progress because of its long experience of cultural diversity and its non-confessional approach.

9.2 The fundamental problem here is that, to a large extent, religious socialisation in families does not exist. Even the efforts of the religious communities themselves to fill the education gap reach only a small proportion of adolescents. On the other hand, the European project “Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European countries (*REDCo*)” has shown that young people generally are interested in finding out about religions, and that the school is best placed to provide this information. However, religious education and history teachers generally have very limited specialist skills in this area: courses are usually too short and the knowledge they provide about the religions is often superficial. This places even greater responsibility on the textbooks.

9.3 For this **Standard** the topic of the religions should be handled in a structured way appropriate to the age group: from simple explanations familiar to the children’s own experiences to wider contexts. Equal attention should be given to the cognitive, existential and social learning outcomes. Students should be introduced to learning through encounter, an opportunity now widely available, and to the cultural manifestations and achievements of the religions. Though it is ideal if the other is an explicit interlocutor, at least textbooks make it possible to get to know the other as implicit interlocutor. Where direct conversation is not feasible, there are stories, biographies and experiences narrated first-hand.

Finally, the extra-curricular life of the school can include festivals, arts events and partnerships beyond the school itself.

School textbooks can initiate and inform, but putting the ideas into practice depends heavily on the skills of the teachers. Essential background knowledge and contexts should be clarified in authoritative teacher handbooks.

It is important that the encounter with the world of religions is open in such a way that teachers as well as students are not forced to accept a special religious viewpoint. The multiplicity of perspectives offered in the religious traditions, but also the critical view from outside should be guaranteed, and so encourage vivid, enriching and also critical learning.

In conclusion, the Standards proposed here may be regarded not only as suitable guidelines for future school textbook design for interreligious learning, but may also be applied to textbook research and the evaluation of new textbooks.

They complement the recommendations of UNESCO and the League of Arab States regarding textbook design for the teaching of history in Europe and in the Arab-Islamic world.

Last but not least, they may assist in the evaluation of other media.