

9

RESEARCH ON RELIGIOUS  
AND SPIRITUAL EDUCATION

Ulrich Riegel,  
Katharina Kindermann

# Field trips to the church

Theoretical framework, empirical  
findings, didactic perspectives

WAXMANN

# Research on Religious and Spiritual Education

edited by

Theo van der Zee, Kirsi Tirri and Ulrich Riegel

Volume 9

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Ulrich Riegel  
Katharina Kindermann

# Field Trips to the Church

Theoretical Framework, Empirical Findings  
Didactic Perspectives



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# Preface

In modern society, religious education at state schools is a challenge. In particular, meaningful learning is contested by those students who cannot refer to any religious experience. To overcome this impasse, the academic discourse of religious education developed the concept of participatory learning. In participatory learning the students take part in religious practice and reflect about this experience afterwards.

Visiting the local church is said to be a powerful case of participatory learning. Church buildings express Christian belief in their design, in their furnishing and in their atmosphere. Inside the church the students have an actual, multi-sensory encounter with Christian practice. Moreover, visiting the local church enables the students to decide by themselves to what extent they want to participate in such practice. A visitor may simply observe how Christian belief is organizing the interior design of the church building. The visitor may also decide to take part in this belief by lightening a candle or by praying in front of the altar. Finally, leaving the classroom to visit some artifact nearby is attractive and is said to raise the situational interest of the students. Consequently, field trips to the local church are promoted as essential aspects of religious learning at state schools.

All these promises and advantages are predominantly based on theoretical concepts and reports of best practice. An empirical study on the effects of such field trips is still missing. This is of particular importance because some obstacles of field trips are conceivable, like disciplinary problems inside the church or overwhelmed students who lack religious socialization. This volume addresses this research gap in religious education. It reports the theoretical background, the empirical design and the results of a project about the effects of field trips to the local church in compulsory Catholic religious education in German primary schools. It draws a comprehensive picture of such effects by identifying the benefits of scholastic field trips to the local church as well as the obstacles of this didactic setup. In particular, it examines the influence of field trips on the students' knowledge about church buildings, on their attitude towards these buildings, on their situational interest, and on their experiences while being inside this building. Further on it reflects the teachers' evaluations of these trips. The volume closes with a discussion on the empirical results and describes didactic principles and methods that may help to improve scholastic field trips to the local church.

It is impossible to implement such an empirical project without the help and support of many people. First and foremost, we like to acknowledge the students and teachers who participated in our study. They did it with great enthusiasm and diligence. Furthermore, this study could not have been conducted without the support of the German Research Foundation DFG. Furthermore, we got a lot of feedback by colleagues who helped us to develop and improve the project. Thanks to all of you,

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Ulrich Riegel & Katharina Kindermann

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# Chapter 1:

## Theoretical Background

Field trips to the local church are regarded as a prime example of participatory religious learning in a state school setting. If such trips are organized according to the pedagogic and didactic principles of *Kirchenraumpädagogik*, the students may experience lived religion. Such experience is the so-called Performative Religious Education Approach's answer to the unique situation of religious education in state schools in Germany. To provide a comprehensive picture of this special German phenomenon, we first describe the situation of religious education in Germany and its implications for religious experience (1). We then present the discourse on Performative Religious Education, which will culminate in field trips to the local church, exemplary of this educational practice (2). We further outline the discourse of *Kirchenraumpädagogik*, one which has developed educational and didactic principles for how to organize such visits to church buildings most effectively (3). Finally, we summarize the discourse's theoretical background and draw up a preliminary research question (4).

### 1 Germany: Compulsory Denominational Religious Education in a Religiously Individualized Society

Secularization is a powerful theory for explaining the social presence of religion and the relationship between national administration and religious communities. However, secularization is not able to explain religion at an individual level. Most European people still belong to a religious community and express some sort of belief. Individualization and pluralization are concepts which are most relevant in this context. Germany is no exception in this regard. But Germany faces a special problem: On the one hand, religious education is a compulsory subject in state schools. On the other hand, this subject is organized according to denominational requirements. This raises the issue of the religious experience in religious education.

## **1.1 Religious Plurality in a Secularized Context**

Like most European countries, Germany is a secularized nation (Pollack 2003). According to official statistics, 66% of the population still belongs to a religious community ([www.destatis.de](http://www.destatis.de)). Belonging, however, does not equate to believing. According to Michel Ebertz (1995), the Christian Churches in particular have lost their power to shape the social life of their adherents. More and more Germans no longer believe in Christian doctrines like the resurrection of Christ or God as the creator of the universe. The attendance of Sunday service is steadily decreasing and confession is rarely practiced anymore. Generally, the Western part of Germany is culturally Christian (Müller, Pollack & Pickel 2013). Many people still believe in a personal God, want to marry in Church or have a Christian funeral, and appreciate the Christian Churches as important service providers in the welfare system. However, they no longer identify with these Churches or actively engage in their practices. The Eastern parts of Germany, as a result of 40 years of socialist atheism, are culturally secular. Here the majority do not believe in any higher power or practice any religious rituals. These people are not just critical towards the Churches and their doctrines, but critical towards religion in general.

Despite the predominantly secular nature of German society, religion is still on the social agenda. First of all, the terror attacks in the beginning of the new century and the ongoing migration of Muslim people into Germany have triggered a public debate about religious fundamentalism, namely Muslim fundamentalism. There is a new awareness in Germany that religious convictions convey truth claims and religion is a suitable marker for individual or collective identity (Herbert 2004). At the beginning of this century Jürgen Habermas (2001) began a discussion about post-secular society. Habermas acknowledged religion as one moral resource of modern society and recognized religious institutions as legitimate participants in civil society if these institutions accept the modern premise of rational argument. Additionally, at the same time an academic discussion began to critically reassess the theory of secularization (Berger 1999; Lambert 2004; Norris & Inglehart 2004). Empirical studies prove that religion still is a factor at the individual level (Pollack & Müller 2013: 11-12; Stolz et al. 2014; Ziebertz & Kay 2006; Zulehner, Hager & Polak 2001). But this individual religiosity is highly privatized, meaning that the individual does not express his/her belief in public. And individual religiosity is subjective, meaning that it is up to the individual to decide which conviction they will follow and which religious or spiritual practice they will engage in (Arnett & Jensen 2002).

Therefore, religion in Germany is pluralistic. At a societal level several religious communities contribute to this plurality. According to official statistics ([www.destatis.de](http://www.destatis.de)), in 2010 31% of the German population was of no denomination, 31% belonged to the Roman-Catholic Church, and 30% belonged to Protestant Churches. Another 5% of the remaining population was found to be Muslim, and 1.6% Christian-Orthodox. .4% belonged to Protestant Free Churches, .3% to Buddhism, .2% to

Judaism, and .12% to Hinduism. At an individual level, empirical studies on adolescents' religiosity identify characteristic religious styles. For instance, Fred-Ole Sandt (1996) analyzed statements of 29 RE-teachers from Hamburg regarding their students' religiosity. He found four typical religious styles: a Christian one, a Muslim one, a "magical" one which believes in practices of Spiritism, and an atheistic style lacking any personal meaning of religion. Carsten Wippermann (1998: 236-248) discovered six different religious styles using data from a representative German-wide survey. Christian adolescents believe in the doctrines of their relevant Church and participate quite regularly in religious services. Non-Christian Theists believe in a personal God, but do not belong to any particular religious community. Believers in reincarnation are convinced that after death they will be reborn in this world. Deistic naturalists believe in a transcendent reality that has created the universe, including the natural laws which define all processes within this universe. Atheistic naturalists are also convinced that the universe functions according to natural laws but deny the existence of any transcendent entity that might have created this universe. Finally, there are the so-called autonomists, who do not believe in any higher power but rather see individuals themselves as creators of meaning in life. Hans-Georg Ziebertz et al. (2003: 384-413) found five types of religiosity in a quantitative survey of the south of Germany. Two types show a distinct Christian profile, believing in a personal God. One of these types represents young people who belong to a religious community and participate in religious practices. The other type consists of young people that do not identify with any religious community. They are quite critical towards the Church and decide on their own which doctrine to believe in and which religious practice to engage in. A third type follows the religious mainstream in their individual environment. If their surroundings are culturally Christian, they follow a culturally Christian agenda. If this environment is more or less secularized, then they do not adopt any religious practice at all. The fourth type is critical towards Christian doctrines and follows alternative forms of spirituality more or less inspired by Asian religious practices. The fifth type, finally, represents non-religious adolescents that do not ascribe any personal significance to religion, but neither do they fight religion individually. Recently, Heinz Streib and Carsten Gennerich (2011: 57-112) described four religious lifestyles based on a broad study of a mixed-method design. They also identify a Christian lifestyle that is strongly related to the Church's doctrine and practices. Further, there is a sectarian lifestyle in which adherents strongly identify with one distinct religious or spiritual community and oppose any doctrine or practice which is not in line with the convictions of their own community. A mystical lifestyle describes adolescents practicing alternative spirituality without belonging to any community. Finally, a secular lifestyle is characterized by contestation of the existence of any transcendent being and indifference towards any form of religion.

What all these studies have in common is that one religious style is found to be strongly related to the major religious tradition present in the relevant society. If adolescents share a German background they identify with the Catholic Church or one of the Protestant Churches and generally follow this Church's doctrines and practices. If the adolescents are of an Arabic background they identify with Islam and adhere to the relevant beliefs and practices. Both types, however, represent a religious lifestyle based on a major religious tradition. Meanwhile, there always exists a secular lifestyle comprising non-religious adolescents. These adolescents do not believe in any God and consequently do not engage in any religious or spiritual practice. However, they are not to be seen as atheists because these young people do not fight religion. They are simply indifferent towards religion. The vast majority of adolescents, finally, are somehow religious without following a distinct doctrine or identifying with a specific religious community. Most of these young people are critical towards traditional religious institutions, and perceive Christian Churches in particular as outdated, subjecting individual faith to institutionalized belief (Arnett & Jensen 2002; Calmbach et al. 2012). Specifically, these individuals articulate their individual belief via distancing themselves from the Church (Prokopf 2008). Consequently, in the Eurobarometer of 1997 33% of the responding German adolescents regarded themselves as 'believing without practicing', while only 17% responded as 'believing and practicing' (European Commission 1997: 24).

## **1.2 Religious Education in German State Schools**

In Germany, religious education is a compulsory subject at state schools. According to the German constitution, "religious instruction shall form part of the regular curriculum in state schools" (Art. 7/3 GG<sup>1</sup>). In the German school system religious education enjoys the same status as mathematics, languages, or history. The state has to guarantee that state schools offer religious education, provide relevant learning material, and employ qualified teachers of religion. At the same time, students have to attend religious education classes. Of course, the German constitution also acknowledges the human right to religious freedom. "Parents and guardians shall have the right to decide whether children shall receive religious instruction." (Art. 7/2 GG) However, if parents decide that their children shall not attend religious education, then the students have to attend lessons in ethics or philosophy. As such, religious education or its equivalent is a regular subject in the school's curriculum.

Nevertheless, religious education is also a unique subject. Again, the German constitution guarantees that this subject "shall be given in accordance with the tenets of the religious community concerned" (Art 7/3 GG). There is some discussion about the meaning of "in accordance with the tenets". The current legal practice, however, is to offer religious education as a denominational subject (Meckel 2011). Thus there

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1 GG is the official abbreviation for „Grundgesetz“, the German constitution from 1949.

is Roman-Catholic religious education, Protestant religious education, Orthodox religious education, Islamic religious education, and Jewish religious education. In each of these subjects the relevant religious community defines the educational goals, determines the subject matter of the relevant curriculum, and articulates the academic and spiritual standards which teachers of religious education have to meet. In Roman-Catholic religious education, for instance, the students are meant to grasp that religion is a basic dimension of life and learn about the fundamental concepts, practices and moral norms of Christian belief (DBK 2004: 7-8). The relevant subject matter is organized according the following topics: mankind and world, God, Bible and Tradition, Jesus Christ, the Church, and religions and worldviews (ibid.: 16). Clearly, this list follows the rationale of Roman-Catholic doctrine, in particular highlighting the central concepts of God, Jesus Christ and the church. It also acknowledges the religious plurality of modern society by considering religions and worldviews. To become a teacher of Roman-Catholic religious education, candidates not only have to study Theology at university, they also have to be baptized into this church and live a decent life according to its spiritual and moral standards (DBK 1987). All in all, this results in a very denominational profile of Roman-Catholic religious education. Consequently, denominational religious education is taught according to the doctrine of the relevant religious community and by teachers that identify with this community.

Given the special character of religious education in state schools, this subject is called a “*res mixta*” (Hildebrandt 2000: 78). On the one hand, religious education has to put into practice the basic educational goals of the relevant school, which have been determined by federal authorities. On the other hand, religious education is taught according to a denominational frame of reference. This “*res mixta*” situation results in a denominational education based on recent educational standards. First, religious education aims to give the students the skills to develop a reasonable personal perspective on religion (Englert 2002a). Its educational focus is on the learning subject, not on familiarizing the students with the religious community or even recruiting new believers. Further, religious education at state school is intended to be “confessional, not confessionalist” (DBK 1996: 46; see also EKD 1994). By using the term “confessional”, the German bishops highlight that every belief is based on fundamental convictions. To teach any religion appropriately, one has to be familiar with its fundamental convictions and the various ways in which this religion is lived. Such familiarity, however, does not exclude alternative personal convictions and beliefs. Religious education at state schools is well aware of the spiritual foundations of its own denominational tradition, but neither denies religious plurality, nor does it discourage other forms of spirituality as would a confessionalist mode of religious education. Finally, denominational religious education is sensitive to students that do not belong to this denomination. Basically, religious education addresses students that identify with the relevant denomination. The students are meant to deal with their “own” religious tradition (DBK 1996). However, also those students who do

not belong to any denomination or identify with another religious tradition may participate in this subject. Thus, the practice of denominational religious education does not feature a homogeneous group of learners.

In summary, denominational religious education in German state schools deals with the doctrine, practices and moral norms of the relevant religious denomination. However, this is done in an open-minded way by also taking into account the religious plurality of modern society. As it is a compulsory subject, students have to attend religious education classes. Although there exists an alternative for those who do not identify with any religious tradition, many of those students still opt for the denominational subject. Consequently, the group of learners in denominational religious education is heterogeneous in religious terms.

### **1.3 The Problem of Religious Experience in Scholastic Religious Education**

A basic challenge for compulsory denominational religious education is, how to deal with students that do not identify with any religious tradition. However, this is just one aspect of the heterogeneity inside the classroom. Some of the learners may belong to an alternative religious community, for example Muslims participating in Roman-Catholic religious education. And even those students who identify with the relevant denomination represent a broad variety of individual religiosity. As previously mentioned, some of them may be familiar with the denomination's doctrine, practices, and moral norms. Others may belong to this denomination without engaging in its rituals and norms. A third group may share a deistic world view which is only loosely connected to the doctrine of this denomination. Facing this fundamental heterogeneity, religious education has to address a twofold challenge. For one, it has to familiarize all students with the basic concepts and moral norms of its particular religious denomination. At the same time, it has to convey the significance of these theological and ethical concepts and beliefs in daily life, which normally has a secular character (Schröder 2012: 284-295).

Christian religious education tackles these challenges via the concept of *Korrelation* (Porzelt 2015).<sup>2</sup> From a theological perspective, this concept deals with the relationship between divine revelation and daily experience. According to Paul Tillich (1987) and Edward Schillebeeckx (1980), revelation cannot occur beyond experience. God reveals himself in daily experience, such that divine revelation and daily experience are correlated. In the 1970s scholars of religious education referred to this concept to answer the question of how Christian doctrine can be taught to students with moderate religious socialization who live in a secularizing environment. According to the didactic concept of *Korrelation*, daily experience is able to convey the

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2 The concept of *Korrelation* is primarily used by Roman-Catholic scholars. Protestant scholars consider the same issue via the concept of *Elementfufuarisierung*.

meaning of Christian doctrine, and Christian doctrine has to be applied to daily experience (Lange 1980). For instance, remembering the emotions experienced when one gave away something of personal importance helps one to fully comprehend the Christian virtue of sharing as it is expressed in the legend of Saint Martin. Furthermore, the students have to consider what they could share, and with whom, if they want to experience this Christian virtue today. In this example the teacher realizes the dialectic relationship of Christian doctrine and daily experience. Of course, the concept of *Korrelation* has also been contested (e.g. Ruster 2000). Such approaches would identify God with human beings and therefore, in the long run, obscure the basic difference between a transcendent reality and contingent creation. Furthermore, *Korrelation* is meant to idealize the practical consequences of applying Christian doctrine, predominantly highlighting the positive effects of such actions. Meanwhile, the students are well aware that such behavior is not regarded as cool in their peer group. However, this critique has in fact contributed to the further development of the didactic concept of *Korrelation*. Today, this concept is a mandatory requirement of religious education in state schools (Hilger 2012).

Recently, a new problem arose that has the potential to challenge the didactic program of *Korrelation* (Ziebertz, Heil & Prokopf 2003). As has already been mentioned, most of the students attending religious education rarely experience religious socialization. Most of them belong to a Christian denomination, but do not identify with this community. They may share some theistic or deistic belief but do not engage in any religious practice. What's more, many of the new generation are spiritual wanderers, searching for meaning in life by practicing various forms of spirituality on a trial basis (Mikkola, Niemelä & Petterson 2007). Their lack of familiarity with traditional religions leads to the problem that many adolescents have no idea what religious experiences are. In an exploratory study, Ziebertz and Riegel (2008: 157-160) found that most of today's young people are not able to report having had their own religious experiences. Only 15% state that they already have felt God's presence and only 24% found comfort in their belief. The ratio rises when the students are asked whether they wish to have such experiences: 31% wish to experience the presence of God and 55% wish to find comfort in their belief. The interpretation of these results is not easy. From a theological perspective, God is present everywhere and addresses everyone. According to this argument, the problem is not the presence of God, but recognizing God's presence. The traditional answer would be that God's presence can be experienced through religious practices like attending a service or praying. Obviously, most of today's adolescents are not familiar with such practices. Perhaps they would agree that it is possible to experience God's presence during liturgy. Since they do not attend any services, however, they have no opportunity to experience God's presence in this way. Additionally, religious experiences may occur in the course of daily life. One has to consciously attribute this experience to religion in order to recognize God's presence in this context. According to Ann

Taves (2009), the religious character of daily experience is distinguished by its specialness. However, to recognize such special experiences as religious, a religious frame of reference is needed. For instance, in secular society the experience of pure nature on a mountain hike or at a lonely sea shore does not necessarily trigger the awareness of a creator. Meanwhile, noticing someone begging on the street may prompt one to offer this person some money. This charity, however, is not necessarily regarded as brotherly love in a Christian sense. Thus, at least some knowledge of religious concepts and some familiarity with lived religion are needed if one is to consider the specialness of such daily experience as religious. One's own religious experience is a crucial aspect of the didactic program of *Korrelation* (Ritter 1989).

Without the concept of religious experience, the didactic program of *Korrelation* is missing a critical element of the dialectical relationship it is made of. It may start with relevant daily experience, but lacks a real point of reference within the religious realm. Religious literacy is not able to compensate for a shortage of religious experience. One may argue that religious education at state schools should inform students about religion and supply them with as much knowledge as possible. In denominational religious education, the teacher would thus communicate many theological concepts and knowledge about spiritual practices and moral norms of the relevant denomination to the students. Of course, such knowledge is needed to interpret daily experience as also being religious. But such knowledge has to be applied to real life, too. The students have to know what to do with this information and these concepts in real life situations. Therefore they need at least a minimum impression of the practical component of theological concepts. Consequently, how to provide today's students with the competence to recognize religion in daily life is a crucial question in the recent discourse of religious education. How can the problem of the students' missing religious experience be resolved?

## **2 Performative Religious Education**

Over the last twenty years, some concepts of religious education have been developed to resolve the aforementioned problem of religious experience. Mirjam Schambeck (2006) has proposed a mystagogic approach to religious education. According to this approach, religious education has to offer the students a religious re-reading of their own biography in order that they may recognize God's presence in their personal course of life. For example, being able to cope with a relative's disease may indicate individual strength as well as God's comfort. The latter would be a religious interpretation of the situation. By offering such interpretations, religious education invites the students to deal with religious worldviews and become acquainted with religiously relevant experiences. An alternative approach addresses the fundamental otherness of any partner in dialogue (Greiner 2000, Grümme 2007). This didactic approach is based on the notion that every individual possesses a unique perspective on life and living together with others. To understand one another in



dialogue, the first task is to take the perspective of the other. In this regard, religious education shall enable the students to acknowledge the “otherness” of each individual and to take the other individual’s perspective. Taking the other’s perspective interferes with one’s own perspective, and therefore triggers learning. For instance, secular perspectives on life may help to clarify the specialness of religious perspectives. The most prominent technique to compensate for the student’s lack of religious experience, however, is the so-called performative approach. We will describe this concept and its didactic program in the following.

## **2.1 The Concept of Performative Religious Education**

The concept of Performative Religious Education (PRE) is based on a discursive approach to religion (Dressler 2002). In the discursive perspective, religion is more than a set of doctrines and propositional utterances. First of all, religion is the communication of foundational experiences which have triggered the faith of the witnesses of these experiences. In the case of Christianity, these experiences are associated with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity is the religious tradition in which these experiences are remembered, told and practiced. Every Christian doctrine is related to these foundational experiences and has to be understood in the context of these experiences. Consequently, religion is a set of cultural practices (Matthes 1992). To fully comprehend religious statements or acts, one has to interpret these statements and acts within the cultural context in which they are made or performed. For instance, telling the story of creation is an expression of trust in God, not a scientific statement about the beginning of the universe. To criticize such a story on the basis of scientific concepts would be to misinterpret the religious context of this story. The same is true, of course, when believers take this story as a scientific account of the beginning of the universe.

If religion is cultural practice, it cannot be grasped by individuals just by them being informed about its doctrine and practices (Dressler 2007; Leonhard & Klie 2003). For instance, to inform an individual about the so-called “five pillars of Islam” is not sufficient to make them understand Islam. To understand this religion comprehensively, one has to engage in the relevant cultural practices. Therefore, performative religious education is basically participatory learning. Participatory learning moves beyond an individualistic and intrapsychic understanding of learning. It conceptualizes learning as a situated practice within a cultural and social context (Hermans 2003: 268-333). According to this approach, learning is embedded in both a community of learners and a cultural context. Firstly, students form a community of learners. This community is characterized by a net of social and mental relationships. These relationships structure both the coexistence of the individual learners and the processes that embody the way this community deals with the subject matter. Consequently, learning is a constructionist interaction including not only the learning experiences of the individual, but also the various experiences made with the other students during the learning process (Rogoff, Matusov & White 1996). Secondly,