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Introduction

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## **Introduction**

Manfred L. Pirner

Since the turn of the millennium, the awareness in liberal democratic societies has grown that religion cannot simply be regarded as a private matter, but that it has an indispensable public dimension. It is obvious that this public dimension is highly ambivalent. On the one hand can manifest itself in problematic mixtures of religious fanaticism and politics, in social tensions, violent conflicts and acts of terrorism. On the other hand – and usually less prominent in the media – the public dimension of religion can be perceived in religions' constructive contributions to the common good, in their promotion of morality, humanity, conflict-solving, peace-building and social cohesion. It seems that these positive contributions of religious communities and religiously inspired people to modern pluralistic societies have recently gained renewed and empirically supported attention, however contested they remain.

In the Christian context, the calling to contribute to the common good has since the 1970s come to be prominently discussed under the label of “public theology”, interestingly in several countries and continents at about the same time. At its core, the notion and concept of “public theology” signals that Christians acknowledge their responsibility for promoting the public good while at the same time acknowledging that they are only one among other religious or worldview groups in a pluralistic society and globalized world. Public theology approaches affirm that Christians need to communicate and cooperate with other religious and nonreligious fellow citizens in their desire to contribute to the well-being of the whole of society and that they need to open up to dialogue and criticism. In this way, public theology reacts to the basically similar situation of growing diversity and secularization in modern societies in many parts of the world, however different the specific contexts may be (see Bedford-Strohm, 2013).

These common inter-contextual perspectives have led to the establishment of the “Global Network of Public Theology” and the “International Journal of Public Theology” in 2007.

However, in the otherwise rich international discourse around public theology the intersection between public theology and education seems to have been widely neglected. It was one major objective of the international and interdisciplinary conference “Public Theology – Religion – Education” (the 12th Nuremberg Forum) that took place at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany, in the autumn of 2016, to address this deficit.<sup>1</sup>

Public theology is linked to the topic of education in at least three major ways. First, it is quite obvious that in liberal pluralistic democracies that are based on the premise of free and equal citizens legal measures by the state cannot be the only and favourite way to ensure the sustainability of a democratic human rights-based culture. The primary and best way to win people for the cause of a humane society and world is to try to convince them by arguments and to try to stimulate learning processes. In his recent work German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has emphasized the role of such learning processes and developed the concept of the “complementary learning” of religious and nonreligious citizens in order to promote fruitful cooperation for the common good of society and the world (see Habermas, 2008; 2017). It is for good reason that several contributions in this volume refer to Habermas and to American philosopher John Rawls in their attempts to clarify the relationship between religions, the public sphere, and education – although with slightly different estimates. But all agree that education in this sense of stimulating learning processes of free and equal human beings is of immense importance to all liberal pluralistic societies. Accordingly, education is also essential for the tasks and intentions of public theology.

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<sup>1</sup> The other major objective of the conference was to explore the relationship of public theology and other religions, including interreligious dialogue and learning, a topic that has also been neglected in public theology discourse. This theme is mainly the subject matter of another book in the series of *Routledge Research in Religion and Education* titled *Public Theology, Religious Diversity, and Interreligious Learning: Contributing to the Common Good through Religious Education* (Pirner et al., 2018).

Second, public education (in state schools as well as in faith-based private schools) is an important subject matter of public theology. Education is vital for all human beings and therefore the right to education rightly belongs to the list of basic human rights. Education is also vital for the very functioning of democracy and public discourse in it. The quality and just distribution of public education therefore must be a primary interest of the state and civil society as a whole. As several book chapters demonstrate, it is especially wide-spread educational injustice that presently challenges public theology and demands starkly increased engagement. In some countries faith-based schools claim to pay particular attention to underprivileged young people and the multidimensional development of their personalities. However, it is a question of controversial dispute, if such schools aggravate rather than alleviate social division by being selective when choosing their pupils and by demanding school fees.

Third, religion in public education can be identified as a special topic of public theology – and of “Public Religious Pedagogy”, a newly developed concept in Germany within the academic discipline of Religious Pedagogy. On the one hand, the human right to education as well as the human right to freedom of religion and belief require that religion as an important, but also ambivalent factor of human culture should not be excluded from or neglected in public education, but that children get the chance of developing an educated and reflective way of dealing with religion in their own lives and in public life. On the other hand, public religious education can be seen as a consequence and concretization of public theology in that it can acquaint students with religious motivations and perspectives for contributing to the common good and clarify the role of religions in the public sphere of pluralistic societies.

These three aspects that link public theology and education provide compelling arguments that education deserves more, and more systematic, attention in the context of public theology discourse than it has received to date. However, to convince those responsible for public education in science, politics and practice that perspectives from Christian theology can

be helpful for this field requires a different set of arguments. Of course the best arguments will be provided by good examples of persons or institutions that from their theological background have successfully committed themselves to the improvement of public education – as they are reported by Katie Day in this volume. From a more theoretical point of view, one could argue that in a liberal democratic and pluralistic society, religious and nonreligious citizens alike should be encouraged to engage in promoting the common good in general and the common good in public education in particular, which of course requires an open debate about what can be defined as the “common good” in the first place. As outlined above, public theology claims to bring in perspectives from its Christian background that can be understandable and convincing to *all* people, without trying to dominate or marginalize others – as these others should also be doing. This is a concept that corresponds to John Rawls’ idea of how a consensus on fundamental values in pluralistic societies can be reached on the basis of “public reason” and an “overlap” of different worldview perspectives. I have elaborated this concept for public education with reference to John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas in another book (Pirner, 2018). In the present context of this introduction I will confine myself to advocating the fairness of listening to everyone who seriously tries to engage in the improvement of public education – and of judging the contributions made by their substance and quality.

The contention that theology at least may have *potential competencies* to address the topic of education can, inter alia, be supported by a look into history. It should be recalled that in ancient as well as modern times, education has always been one major area in which and by which Christianity – as well as other religions – has become public and has influenced public affairs. To be sure, educational practices in Christianity and their influences have also included deeply problematic ones such as threatening children with a punitive God. But the critical discussion of such unacceptable behaviour has also added to the development of educational competence in Christian contexts.

In this respect it is also interesting to take a closer look at some intersections of public theology and education in recent history. For example, it seems to be widely unknown that Martin Marty, who has been credited with having introduced the term “public theology” into academic discourse in 1973, published a book in the year 2000 titled *Education, Religion and the Common Good* in which he offered a passionate plea for integrating religion into public education in US schools and universities. And it has been only a recent discovery for myself that German Systematic theologian Sigurd Daecke already in 1970 wrote about “public theology” in the context of the school subject of Religious Education at public schools. With references to the so-called “New Political Theology” represented by Johann Baptist Metz, Dorothee Sölle, Jürgen Moltmann and others, he advocated a “Public Religious Education” that corresponds to a “public”, “empirical-critical” and “political” theology. He went on to argue that because such a “theologia publica” aims to address the public sphere beyond church walls and the academia it has to apply didactical principles such as have been developed for the school subject of Religious Education at German schools. In my own and Bernhard Grümme’s contributions in this volume you can read more about the further developments in Germany that have led to the recent conceptualization of a “Public Religious Pedagogy” – in analogy to public theology.

But before these two essays *PART I* of this book, *Fundamental Perspectives for Relating Public Theology and Education*, is opened by two other important contributions. *Elaine Graham*, Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Chester, England, and until recently Chair of the Global Network of Public Theology (GNPT), is one of the most outstanding current thinkers of public theology. In her essay she emphasizes the necessity of a complex and multidimensional understanding of public theology in order to be able to address the challenges of the also complex mixture of secularization and decline of religion on the one hand and its transformation and regained public relevance on the other. In this context, the

educational task of promoting religious literacy comes into view as one important consequence of a public theology approach.

On the side of educational theory, *Hanan Alexander* can be called one of the most brilliant thinkers when it comes to reflecting the normative foundations of public education in liberal pluralistic societies. He is at the same time a Jewish Rabbi and Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of Haifa and spent many years in the United States before he moved to Israel. Drawing mainly on John Rawls and Isaiah Berlin, he unfolds his inspiring vision of a “reimagined” liberal education in which religious perspectives are not excluded but have an important role to play.

As indicated above, in my own contribution I offer an outline of recent developments in Germany that have rediscovered the political relevance and public dimension of religious education. Drawing on and referring to public theology the term of “Public Religious Pedagogy” can serve as a paradigmatic conceptual frame in which the public responsibility of religious education as well as the intersections between public theology and education can be discussed. For countries in which multi-faith models of religious education at schools have been established this poses a double challenge: On the one hand religious education theory, which in these countries normally regards religious studies and educational science as primary reference disciplines, is challenged to re-think its relationship to theology, which – as public theology – is no longer dominated by internal, self-centered goals, but rather strives for the common good of all and therefore seems highly compatible with the educational goals of public education. On the other hand, church leaders and theologians who have become used to leaving the territory of public education – at least in the sector of state schools – to educational scientists, religious studies scholars and state authorities are challenged to re-think and re-discover their responsibility for the public sphere of public education.

While my own essay provides more of an overview of the recent developments around Public Religious Pedagogy in Germany, *Bernhard Grümme* offers a systematic, conceptual analysis of the relationship between public theology and (Public) Religious Pedagogy with a focus on educational justice. Grümme is Professor of Religious Education at the University of Bochum, Germany, and has been one of the first scholars to use the term of Public Religious Pedagogy programmatically. Starting from his own teaching experiences, he points to considerable problems of social injustice in and through German schools – and to the finding that theology has widely neglected these problems so far. Along this concrete example, Grümme explicates consequences for the relationship between public theology and Religious Pedagogy. His hypothesis is that public theology needs Religious Pedagogy in order to gain contextual, analytical and systematic structure, in other words, political sharpness. And vice versa Religious Pedagogy needs to become a Public Religious Pedagogy, that is, more aware of its political implications and tasks.

The issue of educational justice is also the focus of the essay by *Katie Day*, Professor of Church and Society at The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, USA. She introduces us with unique insight into the deplorable gap of injustice in public education in the U.S. – a gap that is due to the maldistribution of resources which is worsening all the time. Day laments that although public theology is clearly challenged by this situation and can draw on theological concepts to analyze and criticize it, few theologians have committed themselves to work on its improvement. However, she also shows encouraging examples of people and institutions that have successfully made a change.

*Sebastian Kim* is another internationally renowned expert in public theology writing in this book. He has only recently accepted a position as Professor of Theology and Public Life at the Fuller Theological Seminary in California, USA, after having served for twelve years as a professor at the University of York, England. Looking for bridges between public theology and



education as well as other secular disciplines and arenas, Kim suggests to revalue the Biblical wisdom tradition. His hypothesis is that because of its roots in diverse ancient cultures and its theological openness the wisdom tradition offers itself as a methodological basis for the interdisciplinary discourse that is so vital for public theology.

*Peter Schreiner* enriches the first section of this book by his institutional perspective. He is director of the Comenius Institute, an important institution of the Protestant churches of Germany exclusively committed to the subject area of education and with the special task to promote the discourse between theology and educational science in the context of the public responsibility of the churches. From his long-time service in the Comenius Institute, but also based on his vast experience in diverse European bodies and commissions, Schreiner outlines decisive historical milestones as well as basic theoretical foundations in this academic, political and practical work at the intersection between theology and education.

As especially Hanan Alexander makes clear in his contribution, linking public theology and education is not possible without links between theological and general ethical reasoning, because the objectives of public education in pluralistic societies must build on shared values. It is for this reason that PART 2 of the present volume deals with *Challenges of Public Theology for Ethical Reasoning and Learning*. It is opened by a contribution of *Ulrich Hemel* who is at the same time Associate Professor of Religious Education at the University of Regensburg, Germany, and a successful entrepreneur with a record of several important management positions in big business companies. He has linked economic business and ethical responsibility not only in his own practice but also in several books he has written and in founding the Institute of Social Strategy (IFS) that aims to promote the development of a global civil society in which business companies perceive themselves as responsible actors that can contribute to the common good. In his essay, Hemel explicates this approach as a “journey of learning” that starts by reframing economic theory based on anthropological assumptions and arrives at

ethical minimum standards and the search for a common value orientation – to which religions and their theological perspectives have much to contribute.

Dr. habil. *Birte Platow*, senior lecturer at the University of Augsburg, Germany, in her essay also deals with the field of business and market economy. Her contribution goes back to her post-doc book (“Habilitation”) and starts with the observation that often theological-ethical contributions to economical discourse lack concrete ideas of how concepts can be put into practice. On the basis of an analysis of prominent theories of decision making in business contexts she contends that didactical concepts from Religious Education can serve as links between (public) theology and economic rationality by providing strategies of reflective decision making, in which theological-ethical aspects can be integrated.

As Professor of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, *Willem Fourie* has a special interest in leadership and development. In his essay he inquires about the contribution of public theology to leadership training. He contends that perspectives from public theology can significantly promote competencies in the fields of collaboration and critical thinking.

Concluding PART 2, Dr. *Florian Höhne*, lecturer and researcher at the Humboldt-University in Berlin, Germany, shows how theological insights drawing on the Old Testament ban on images can inspire the education and training of journalists. After demonstrating and arguing for the necessity of an ethics of news images, Höhne then specifies the perspectives public theology could bring in from the Old Testament tradition.

PART 3 of the present volume, *Religion in Public Education. Tasks, Challenges and Controversies*, assembles a number of contributions that provide illuminating perspectives and stimulating reflections on this important field of public theology and Public Religious Pedagogy – sometimes their controversial views add to the insights they offer. The section is opened by a contribution of *Terence Lovat*, Professor Emeritus of Theology and Values Education at the

University of Newcastle, Australia, on the dissatisfying state of Religious Education in Australian schools. According to his diagnosis, a paucity of theological underpinning and directionality is the primary reason why RE in Australia is mostly disregarded as a school subject of little appeal. Lovat advocates a public theology perspective as one highly suitable to redressing this weakness and providing RE with the theological infrastructure necessary for its role, be it as an agent of enfaithing, interfaith literacy or general education.

By contrast to Lovat's pronounced emphasis on a theological foundation of RE, *Bruce Grelle* from his U.S.-American background contends that it is precisely the *secular* academic study of religions that can make significant contributions to the common good. Drawing on his own experience as Professor of Religious Studies at the California State University at Chico, he shows how religious studies can foster a critical awareness of students' taken-for-granted assumptions and an appreciation of diverse religious and secular worldviews as resources for students' own ecological and moral imaginations.

*Thomas Wabel's* context is the German school subject of (widely confessional and theologically backed) Religious Education. For this context, Wabel, who is Professor of (Protestant) Systematic Theology and Director of the Dietrich-Bonhoeffer Research Center for Public Theology at the University of Bamberg, critically discusses John Rawls' and Jürgen Habermas' concept of translating religious arguments into secular language. While he agrees that it is central for the contribution of religions within public discourse he questions whether it is also sufficient for students of RE classes who often lack any knowledge of religious traditions altogether. Wabel advocates complementary, mainly aesthetic approaches to Religious Education.

Wabel's colleague at the University of Bamberg, Professor of Protestant Theology and Religious Education *Henrik Simojoki*, has a research focus on globalization and global learning. From his perspective the digital media constitute one of the most pressing and most widely

discussed issues in both (public) theology and Religious Education. In his paper, Simojoki focuses on the “digital divide” and the challenges it poses to public theology, global learning and RE. With the term “digital divide” media and sociological researchers denote the fact that media users benefit to quite different extent from their media usage: Intelligent users tend to choose quality programmes and networks that help them to achieve their professional goals and enhance their personal development, while less intelligent users tend to spend their time with superficial entertainment programmes or video games, which is counterproductive for their professional as well as their personal career.

The following two contributions reflect an ongoing controversy between the two authors the subject matter of which is of principle relevance for the discourse about Religious Education, its public relevance and political dimension. This is why we are grateful to Liam Gearon and Bob Jackson that they have agreed to present and further clarify their positions in two newly written texts. In his essay, *Liam Gearon*, Professor of Education at the University of Oxford, England, calls into question what he calls the “politicisation and securitisation” of religion in education. Against the backdrop of the increasingly ambivalent and problematic political role that some forms of religion play in our present societies, Gearon sees the danger that RE – and research on RE – may be politically instrumentalized in the name of security and social coherence. As examples by which such a danger becomes visible, he points to the *Toledo Guiding Principles* and the international research project REDCo. It is mainly this criticism of the *Toledo Principles* and the REDCo project that prompted *Robert Jackson*, Emeritus Professor of Religious Education at the University of Warwick, England, to critically analyze and challenge Gearon’s position. Jackson diagnoses a significant shift in Gearon’s position from endorsing the public role of RE and its contributions to citizenship or human rights education to suspecting an inappropriate instrumentalization of RE in the interest of security policies. Jackson defends the academic quality and integrity of the *Toledo Principles* as well as of the REDCo project and criticizes Gearon’s form of this suspicion as exaggerated, although

he acknowledges the general necessity to be aware of and critically discuss possible functionalizations of RE.

PART 3 is concluded by a special kind of text. *Siebren Miedema*, Emeritus Professor of Educational Foundations and Religious Education at the VU University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, has written an evocative manifesto that calls for educators and religious educators to be aware of the often problematic political influences in schools and to consciously as well as reflectively act as public intellectuals in society at large – for the benefit of the children and youngsters that should receive the best support to develop their personhood in public education. It seemed quite appropriate to us to include this manifesto at the end of a volume on public theology and education as its plea corresponds with the intention of this book to encourage its readers to take their responsibility for public education and its links to religion seriously.

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