

A Christian Perspective on Religion and Religious Education in the Postmodern Era

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ARTICLE HISTORY	ABSTRACT
Accepted: October 24 th , 2018 Revised: October 31 st , 2018 Published: November 5 th , 2018	Speaking of religious education the hypothesis “Religious education fosters tolerance” is often heard. This will be the core question for my presentation. How far is it true? Talking about religion and religious education in the postmodern era means to focus on the contextual and become situated in a certain environment. The time of universal and general statements is gone. Therefore, this presentation will not speak about a Christian perspective in general, but about Christian religious education in Europe, namely in Switzerland. This paper will focus on the specific situation of educating religious specialists in a secular state, and address theological education in Switzerland. First, I will discuss the two terms postmodern and Religion that come up so prominent in this conference. Then, after an introduction to the Swiss religious landscape, I will deliver a case study of the programmes and courses taught at the Faculty of Theology in Basel and ask how far these study plans increase religious tolerance. At the end, I will deliver some theses that in my opinion are basic conditions for a religious education enhancing tolerance.
KEYWORDS	
Christian Perspective, Religion and Religious Education, Postmodern Era	

INTRODUCTION

Postmodern is a target word or a **search term**. There is not one single and accurate definition of the term postmodern. Postmodern means a **critical thinking** showing alternatives to the mainstream thinking of modernity. It shows a discomfort with modernity and its developments. In one sentence it means: we do no longer believe in the Enlightenment in the sense of a universally valid reason.

The French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard proclaimed already in 1979 **the end of grand narratives** (Lyotard, 1993). Lyotard declared two types of narratives. “Mythical narratives” that are oriented towards an origin and modern “meta-narratives”

oriented towards a common goal. Such meta- narratives are for example the one of the emancipation of the reasonable subject in the Enlightenment, or the meaningful progress of history (historicism) or the dialectic of the mind (idealism). He criticized that every modern narrative is concentrating on a central principle to reach universal statements. The consequence of such a procedure is excluding heterogeneity, excluding our reality. Today, we realize that the above mentioned grand narratives decay. They fall into ruin. And the whole modern society is in a crisis of legitimation. Therefore, today we are no longer oriented towards universality. Postmodern means that we do no longer believe in meta-narratives and we do not have one single goal orientation.

Postmodern thinking has at least **three important consequences for my research**: First, I always have to remember, that I can not deliver reality. No understanding, no intellectual undertaking can really capture reality. What we invent are only allusions to something we think about. Second, we have to think and argue contextually. Postmodern means that every thinking has its limitations, there is not one single everlasting truth, but the world is seen as radically plural. Every truth can only exist next to another truth. Third, postmodern means a kind of a rejection of reason and a turning to affectivity. Could we also involve other means than thinking and discussing on a cognitive level in our teaching? Could this refusal of reason also be a chance for belief and spirituality in our society?

I hope I could make it clear why (and also how) we have to focus on a limited context if we look at religion and religious education. But focusing on a limited and therefore very local context would not be enough to understand a postmodern situation. The focus on the local context would only be the first step. Plurality is not the single characteristic of our postmodern era, but also transnational relationships. Taking the postmodern era and perspective seriously, we will not stop with a local and contextual research, but we will also have to look for transnational entanglements. **‘Entangled history’** is a concept and a historical perspective in historiography. The basic assumption is that neither nations, nor empires, nor civilizations can be the exclusive and exhaustive units and categories of historiography. Not the shared history is in the foreground, but the relationships and exchanges between different actors. Such a historiography is not keen to compare but to weave the stories together (Conrad / Randeria / Sutterlüty 2002, Randeria 1999). It is about transcultural transfers on both sides (for interdisciplinary research in this framework see also Hock and Mackenthun, 2012).

The focus of my presentation today clearly lies on the curricula of the Faculty of Theology in Basel, but we will also shortly look at the web in which Basel university lies and what kind of entangled history Basel has with Kalimantan, Indonesia.

But before we do this, we briefly have to talk about **religion**. The term of reference of the International Seminar on Religion and Religious Education in Postmodern Era has given us several definitions or parts of a definition of religion. Religion lies “beyond all reasoning”, it is “a plunge into the unknown”, all religions have “a notion of an immutable truth”, and religions are seen as “social constructs” (ISRREPE 2018, 1). We already see in these short **definitions** that we can define the term differently according to our standpoint and according to the goal we would like to achieve. Linda Woodhead (2011) criticizes that research in general forgets to critically reflect its own normative conception of religion while treating it. Therefore, she presents **five different concepts of religion**. Not to claim completeness, but to show what researchers of religion certainly need to be aware of.

“The solution to these issues proposed here is that the social scientific study of religion should simply become more self-conscious and self-critical in its approach to ‘religion’. It is not necessary to begin each study with a definition of religion, but it is necessary to have some critical awareness of what concept(s) of religion are in play, and to be able to justify their applicability in particular contexts of use.” (Woodhead, 2001: 122).

Woodhead speaks about five main concepts, in which different aspects of religion are emphasized. Religion as culture, religion as identity, religion as relationship, religion as practice, religion as power. Every concept has its own chances and challenges. In my presentation, I mainly understand religion as a form of culture. Religion as culture can be understood as an embracing system of meaning which covers the whole life or as a system of values, as a discourse, as tradition. This framing of religion is very popular, but power relations or non-linguistic traditions are not really taken into account. One aspect of this concept is to treat “religion as a matter of belief in the supernatural” (Woodhead, 2011:

123). But when we are talking about religion as social constructions we are operating with a concept of religion as relationship that overlaps with the concept of religion as identity. Here, religion serves to bind people together. The focus can be on interconnections and networks or on boundaries and differences that form identities.

When we are talking about religious education, it is worth to use religion at least in these two senses, the definitions in the term of references already show this direction when they speak of religion as a “plunge into the unknown” or as “social constructs”.

In our presentations today, we will talk about religions as social constructions, we will talk about very **different forms of religion**, about theistic and non-theistic religions, about western and eastern religions. Christianity and Islam are said to be western religions, although both have been born in the Middle East. They have an exclusive orientation and are evangelistic. Hinduism is seen as an inclusive and universal religion, more philosophical and less evangelistic in practice (for a deeper introduction in the living religions today see Fisher, 2008).

For the European context we have to emphasize another development in our postmodern era. Religion has become something very much individualized, above all amongst adolescents. According to Schweitzer, there are three main characteristics for the concept of **individualized religion**. First, the adolescents distinct “between their own faith and the faith maintained and taught by religious institutions. [...] A second characteristic is the conviction that it is right to have one’s own religious convictions and that it is no problem at all to disagree openly with the official religious traditions and even, consciously, to deviate from them” (Schweitzer, 2007: 91). Social or public external control for religious convictions seems to have disappeared completely. Schweitzer calls the third characteristic of individualized religion “conventional individualism” (2007: 92). This means that the ideal of having free choices remains rather abstract, and is combined with conventional or group-oriented attitudes.

“The sociological concept of individualization that I am referring to does not mean individualism, and it also does not refer to individualized perspectives. It simply implies that people tend to assume that their lives are not predetermined by birth and social origin, and that each and every one has the right and also the responsibility to shape his or her life according to their own wishes and life plans. It seems that this well-known characteristic of modern or postmodern societies has far-reaching religious implications as well.” (Schweitzer, 2007: 90)

When it comes to the question of religion and tolerance, we have to admit that religion is something **ambivalent** in itself. It can be both, a help or a hindrance to many things. Believing people are said to be more optimistic (Myers, 1992), physical healing can appear, many empirical assessments have been made regarding the value of religion

(eg. Spilka et al, 2003). On the other hand, the dark side of religion has also been validated in research for many years. For example, a linear relationship between church attendance and prejudice could be found (Altemeyer 2003). The content of religious messages, various social factors and issues of personality are determinative considerations for the connection of religiosity with prejudice (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997). Such factors have to be in mind in research targeting the questions when and why the religious proscriptions of tolerance are not taken into account.

RESEARCH METHOD

Case Study: Faculty of Theology, Basel, Switzerland

Now, we turn to a little case study in my own context. We look at religious education in Switzerland. We want to learn something about religious education on an academic level and how it is connected to tolerance.

When it comes to **Switzerland**, we are talking about a mainly Christian context and background. But, the religious landscape in Switzerland has changed a lot over the last 20 to 30 years. Firstly, in most Swiss cantons, the number of members of the protestant church, the Reformed Church of Switzerland, has rapidly gone down, whereas the importance of other denominations and religions has increased. Historically, the reformed church and the catholic church made up more than 90% of the population in Switzerland for a long time. Secondly, many people living in Switzerland do not belong to a formal religion anymore (For further information on the situation of the Reformed Church in Switzerland, see: Stolz and Ballif, 2010).

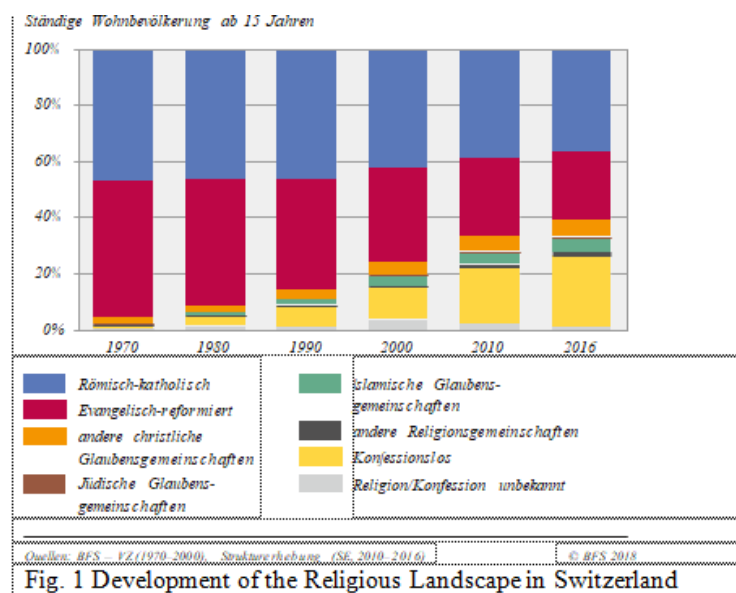


Fig. 1 Development of the Religious Landscape in Switzerland

Although the secularisation thesis – defined as ‘the idea that traditional religions are in terminal decline in the industrialised world’¹ – has to be criticised above all for its notion of linear progress and blind spots, one must admit that membership in institutionalised religions

Has decreased in Switzerland. In 2016, roughly a quarter of the population (24%) in Switzerland viewed themselves as not belonging to any denomination whereas in 1990 less than 10% of the population did so (BFS, 2016). That said, one has to take a closer look at people who still belong to a religion. Here we can observe a pluralisation of religions and denominations. Islamic believers have increased, though they still make up only 5% of the population. And when we look at Christian confessions, we can see that the number of members in the Roman Catholic Church is quite stable and that today there is a vast diversity of different Christian denominations (BFS, 2016). Christianity has never been so diverse. Processes of migration have changed church and society in Switzerland and these processes are still ongoing. Switzerland will become even more diverse and multi-religious in the years to come.

In Switzerland we can speak of a “benevolent secularism” meaning that religions are tolerated in the public sphere to a certain degree. Switzerland is also religiously neutral. This neutrality means that the state does not interfere in contents of beliefs or religious doctrines. The Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation guarantees equality before the law (Art. 8 BV)² and freedom of religion and conscience (Art. 15 BV)³. These two articles clearly forbid discrimination on religious grounds.

Now we turn to **Basel**. Basel is a rather small, but cosmopolitan and internationally-minded city, where many different cultures meet. It is located at the river Rhine, where the borders of France, Germany and Switzerland meet.

The faculty of Theology belongs to **Basel University**, founded in 1460. Basel University is Switzerland’s oldest university. Today, Basel university has a high responsibility to more societal stakeholders in industry, culture, media and politics than ever before. Basel university focuses on society’s expectations, expands its global focus and continues to play a significant role in shaping identity of north-west Switzerland.

The **faculty of Theology** as one of the founding faculties of Basel university is the oldest in Switzerland. The faculty is aware of the urban religiously diverse environment and it strongly considers the interactions between Christianity and other

forms of religion. In the meantime, the faculty of Theology provides the formal education and lays the basic foundation for becoming an ordained pastor of the reformed church of Switzerland.

The faculty therefore has to fulfil a double duty. The combination of classical theological education and research with a cultural studies perspective is one of the particular strengths of the faculty. The faculty has evolved into a faculty offering various different fields of study related to religion in recent years. Today, the Chairs for Science of Religion, Islamic Studies and Jewish Studies are affiliated to the Faculty of Humanities as well as to the Faculty of Theology. One good example of the structural developments during the recent years is that in 2010, a non-theologian and a member of the Jewish faith has been appointed Dean of the Faculty of Theology for the first time.

Today, we will focus on the reactions to the religiously diverse environment and the interreligious developments of the faculty in Basel as one of its specificities. For this purpose, I will first explain the different fields of study to you.

Classical Theology is the largest field of study at the faculty of Basel. It is shaped by a protestant tradition, but open to other religious persuasions. The core subjects are Bible Exegesis, Church History, Systematic Theology, Practical Theology and the field of Extra-European Theology and Ecumenism where I belong to. The last subject is in this form unique in Switzerland and also shows the connection to Basel Mission, a missionary organisation operating from Basel in the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century. Missionaries from Basel also reached out to Kalimantan.

- a. Old Testament Studies and Semitic Philology: the languages, cultures, and history of the Old Orient are taken as key to the Hebrew Bible.
- b. New Testament Studies: studying the New Testament as part of the contemporary ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural, religious, and literary history with an emphasis on the socio- historical analysis of the circles bearing it.
- c. Church History: studying Christian Life over a period of two thousand years.
- d. Dogmatics: Christian faith in a strongly international, interdisciplinary and interreligious orientation.
- e. Ethics: as the theory of Christian responsibility for modern society undergoing rapid transformation.

- f. Practical Theology: theory of “lived religion” and practical science for professionals in a pluralist society
- g. Extra-European Christianity (Ecumenical Studies and Missiology): investigating the transcultural dynamics of Christianity.

If you want to become an ordained pastor of the reformed church you have to have a master’s degree in theology before you are allowed to attend the practical year in the church which leads to ordination (for further information see: Theologie, 2018).

Besides these normal undergraduate and also postgraduate programmes in theology the faculty also maintains **three programmes in further education with an intercultural or interreligious focus.**

In a globalizing society, intercultural and interreligious issues are becoming more prominent. As we have seen before, Christianity and the church-ecumenical landscape in Switzerland are differentiating. The denominational and institutional diversity is manifested by the increasing presence of so-called “migrant churches”, migrant-led local communities and international community networks. The **Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) “Intercultural Theology and Migration”** reflects these changes from a theological perspective. The CAS Intercultural Theology and Migration is a one-year course and consists of 11 course weekends and 10 evening tutorials. It started in summer 2016 for the first time. In the foreground are issues of interculturality that arise in the context of migration. The course brings together participants from different cultural contexts, theological and ecclesiastical imprints. Church leaders and other co-workers learn together along the classical theological curriculum. Experience-based learning and the strengthening of practice-relevant competences are in the foreground. Participants also acquire knowledge of specificities of the Swiss church and religious landscape (history, upheavals, innovations). In this sense, the course strives in the broadest sense to promote intercultural and theological dialogue and to work on ecumenical perspectives for action. This learning does not only take place in the classroom, but also during the shared meals, in the evening and even during the nights, because all participants stay together overnight in shared rooms. The learning not only takes place on a cognitive level but also on a spiritual level as the group shares common prayers in the end of the day. The CAS Intercultural Theology and Migration is planned and carried out in cooperation with the Reformed Churches of German-speaking Switzerland. This should strengthen ecumenical relationships and create networks. At

the same time, the CAS serves as a "practiced integration" into a multi-religious Switzerland and helps migrants to move in such a secular society (for further information see: Advanced Studies, 2018a).

Besides this theological CAS, there are **two programmes of the Cooperation of the Upper Rhine Cluster** regarding interreligious dialogue. Many business enterprises in the region of the Upper Rhine find a pluralism of beliefs among their employees, with religious plurality and religious indifference being commonplace. Many employees make claims against the background of their religious beliefs, while others strongly reject religious statements in the workplace. In the face of this situation, many HR managers, as well as public authorities and institutions, are now calling for inter-religious education. Six universities or institutions at the Upper Rhine in Switzerland, France and Germany bundle their competences in the field of inter-religious dialogue in the Project INTER-RELIGIO. They maintain two programmes, a CAS and a Master programme. These two programmes should not only enhance interreligious sensibility and dialogue but also cross-border learning, teaching and research. The focus of this training is on religious expressions from a sociological and legal point of view and on questions of pedagogy.

The **CAS "Religious Plurality in Theory and Practice"** is a one-year course and started in summer 2018 for the first time. This course is organized in 10 bloc events (Friday and Saturday) and treats questions of religious plurality in a multi-perspective way. An integral part of the programme is the examination of the theological foundations, social forms and interreligious relations of the major world religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism). But also new forms of religiosity and spirituality are discussed. Key approaches to a theology of religion are presented and possibilities of interreligious dialogue are described in a comparative-theological perspective. In addition, the social and religious conditions of interreligious coexistence are explained and current challenges in case studies are discussed (for further information see: Advanced Studies, 2018b)

In summer 2019, a **European Master in Interreligious Studies** will start. In this master degree programme, which is open to any people holding a Bachelor, the students have to acquire 120 credit points in five different fields of study. 30 credit points they have to obtain in another university than their "home-university". The students learn the basics and the history of interreligious relations, they study basic texts

of world religions and learn exegetical and hermeneutical methods. The third field of study is religious convictions in history and in present days. Furthermore, the relationships between religion, society and state are treated and the field of Science of Religion and Philosophy of Religion are part of the study plan.

These rather new developments at the Faculty of Theology in Basel are a reaction to the more and more differentiating religious landscape in Switzerland. All the three programmes are still in their infancy and it is too early to see or judge the outcomes. But I think these three programmes belong to the **key features of the religious education at Basel university**. More than any other University in Switzerland, Basel emphasizes intercultural and inter-religious questions. This is not only the case with these special additional programmes, but also within the classical theological education. Every student in the bachelor has to obtain at least twelve credit points (out of 180) in the field of Jewish Studies (with the core research areas of history, religion and literature) and in the field of Science of Religion. In the master programme the students have to obtain at least 6 credit points (out of 120) in the field of Science of Religion and Jewish Studies.

The faculty of Theology not only has relationships with institutions in its neighbourhood, its relations are reaching as far as to Indonesia, Kalimantan. The theological education in Kalimantan and Basel have an **entangled history**. I will quickly introduce you to this history. In the 1920s Basel Mission “inherited” the mission field Borneo from the German Rhenish Missionary Society that was active in Kalimantan since 1835. Basel Mission sent out missionaries to South and Central Kalimantan, they built up stations far away from the coast to bring the light of the gospel to these people living in darkness. This strongly colonial endeavour had a first end in 1935. Since 1935, the Evangelical Church in Kalimantan became more and more self-governed. Not only the Second World War and the Japanese occupation accelerated this development, but also the local education of the pastors. The independence of the mother church in Europe was strongly related to education.

In 1935, the first five Dayak pastors, called pandita, have been ordained, after they have fulfilled a study programme for pastors in Banjarmasin that was set up in 1932 by missionaries from Basel. The goal was to educate locals to become pastors. In the early days the school in Banjarmasin was strongly linked and quite similar to the missionary school in Basel, which was an education centre for missionaries, not

belonging to the University of Basel, and focusing on methods of evangelizing and practical issues. The missionary school in Basel has been closed in 1956. The old form of a European missionary spreading the gospel all over the world, the model of an artisan-theologian was not needed anymore. The school in Banjarmasin developed more and more to a school with high educational standards, local components and local teachers. A pastor and a theologian has to deal with more than Christian religious problems. He or she also has to have knowledge in cultural, sociological and philosophical questions. Today the old missionary school has changed a lot and is called STT GKE Banjarmasin. Since 2003, the students follow a bachelor and a master's programme. These programmes have strongly contextual and interreligious parts. Classical theology is taught in a contextual way, Islam and Kaharingan as well as the local Dayak culture are taken into account in the curricula.

CONCLUSION

We come back to the hypothesis from the beginning: Religious education is a key to tolerance. How far is this true? What have we seen from our case study in Basel?

Switzerland is very much characterized by the specific case of **individualized religion**. One could assume this kind of religion as a starting point for tolerance, because it is left to individuals what she or he might believe. Empirical qualitative studies have shown that this is not the case. Individualization is not a remedy against prejudice but rather leads to not well-informed judgements and stereotyped dividing lines between religious groups (Schweitzer, 2007: 94). Therefore, a profound religious education is needed above all in contexts with the situation of individualized religion.

But, **not every religious education is a key to tolerance**. It is only a key to tolerance when the education fulfils two specific conditions:

First, the education has to **include something about "the other"**. There is a clear need for information about the religions. Religious education that only teaches knowledge of one single religion, does not yet foster tolerance. Knowing your own tradition in depth can be a first step to tolerance. But when it stops with that, it is rather possible that intolerance and prejudices are fostered. The faculty in Basel makes strong efforts to add this component to its study plans on every level, be it bachelor, master or further education.

Secondly, **the aim of religious education has to be clear.** The aims of a religious education that fosters tolerance are clearly **educational** rather than **religious**. A religious education that fosters tolerance has to pursue educational objectives. To mark a distinction between different forms of religious education, Basil Moore used the term religion education for an education with solely educational objectives and religious education for an education that pursues religious interests (Moore, 1991). While religion education would be the task of the state, religious education, the teaching of religions, lies in the responsibility of homes, families, and religious communities. The education regarding religion should therefore be two-fold. One is organised by the public schools and has educational objectives, it is a teaching about religion, and the second is organised by religious communities and is called a teaching in religion (Furer, 2012).

“The best we can hope for is that the school can provide learners with a basic introduction to religion, religions, and religious diversity in ways that might increase understanding, reduce prejudice, and facilitate respect. If those educational goals are to be achieved, then religion cannot be dealt with religiously“ (Chidester, 2006: 2).

Therefore, a religious education – or in the words of Moore – religion education has to pursue **three main goals**. It has to increase the understanding of any religion, it has to reduce prejudice, and expand the respect for human diversity. If these goals are achieved, tolerance will be the consequence.

But is a teaching about religions enough to produce motives for tolerant attitudes? In Germany, you find a project called ‘religious roots of tolerance’ (Schwöbel and Tippelskirch, 2002) that discovers the roots of tolerance within Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Tolerance can not be imposed from outside, tolerant attitudes have to be practiced under the lead of institutions in society that support the development of tolerant identities. Churches or other religious communities could be good candidates for this task. The aim of such a practical tolerance-training is not to relativize religious identities, but to appropriate religious traditions in a way that they can become resources for tolerance (Schwöbel, 2002: 21). In a Christian perspective, Jesus could become the role model for tolerance and openness towards other religions. Jesus had chosen disciples with a doubtful past, Jesus loved sinners. In the parable of the Samaritan (Lk 10, 25-37) an open attitude towards groups that are not accepted by one’s own religion is fostered (see for a concrete example: Lähemann, 1998). In such an approach motives for tolerance that are inherent in the Christian tradition itself are made

visible. Such a model only works when you clearly identify with the Christian tradition. For our situation today, where individualized religion plays an important role, a multidimensional and dialogical approach is needed.

Schweitzer calls it a “co-operative religious education” (2007: 97). Such kind of education is supporting the development of religious identities and openness and dialogue. We have looked at education on an academic level today. I will close my presentation by asking a last question. When has a religious education that fosters tolerance to start? Starting this kind of religious education only at the high level of academic education will not be sufficient. The religious education in Basel at primary school level also has to have a strongly multi-religious component. The approach of a co-operative religious education, where for example teams of different religious backgrounds teach, would be very suitable here. At the moment the religious education in public schools in Switzerland tends to become an ethical education with no experiences on a practical level.

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Fig. 1 Development of the Religious Landscape in Switzerland. Bundesamt für Statistik, Strukturerhebung 2010-2016.