Didactics of the Study of Religions

Wanda Alberts
Department for the Study of Religions and Religious Education, University of Bremen, P.O. Box 330440, 28334 Bremen, Germany
albertsw@uni-bremen.de

Abstract
In contrast to well-established didactics of theologies, the study of religions, even though its field is becoming more and more important in schools and elsewhere in society, has not yet developed a didactic branch. This article outlines and exemplifies three tasks for didactics of the study of religions: (1) analysis of models of education about religion(s), (2) development of concepts for education about religion(s), (3) engagement in practical issues related to education about religion(s), including participation in political and public debates about religion, religious plurality, education, and religious education. Tasks 1 and 2, which may be called “inner-academic,” are exemplified with research results from my study about integrative religious education in Europe. Task 3, relating to the communication of academic insights beyond academia, is regarded as a necessary complement to “inner-academic” work. In conclusion, it is argued that in order to develop didactics of the study of religions it is necessary to combine the subject knowledge and methodologies of the study of religions with insights from education. Rather than leaving this educational task to educationalists with little knowledge of our subject, the study of religions needs to establish its own didactics with respect to various educational contexts.

Keywords
integrative religious education, the study of religions, religious education, Europe, didactics of the study of religions, plurality, education

Introduction: The Discipline of the Study of Religions and Religious Education
The importance of learning about different religions in school contexts has been acknowledged recently in different parts of the world (e.g. ...
The academic discipline of the study of religions, however, has shown little interest in the representation of religions in schools and has left this field primarily to theologians or other people with an interest in school RE, who do not have a professional background in the study of religions (cf. Jensen 2002; Alberts 2007:2–5). The absence of didactics of the study of religions, in combination with the general lack of recognition of the study of religions in the public sphere (Rudolph 2000:241; McCutcheon 2000:168), has resulted in the fact that the discipline of the study of religions, until very recently, has often not been considered an adequate partner for teaching about religion in schools. However, education about religion and religions, in schools and elsewhere, is related to the very subject matter of the study of religions. Other than religious education (RE) organised by religious communities, education about religions in secular frameworks is a direct field of application for the discipline of the study of religions. Ideally, the study of religions can offer an impartial framework for the study of different religions also in schools, or at least attempt to apply an impartial approach and discuss openly the problems related to this task. Furthermore, the analytical and discursive competence of the study of religions with respect to fields like religion, religious plurality, worldviews and values is needed also outside universities. It can serve to make basic distinctions, for example, between religious and secular approaches to religious diversity, and help to deal sensitively with questions of representation as well as presuppositions and agendas behind different approaches to religion.

1) For this topic, see also the article by Robert Jackson in this issue.
2) It should be added, however, that there are prominent exceptions. A well-known example is Ninian Smart’s influence on religious education in England.
3) In this context, “religion” (in the singular) is not to be misunderstood as an essentialised notion of religion, but serves as a generic term denoting a diversity of phenomena. “Religions” (in the plural) may be used in order to emphasise that this subject matter is characterised by plurality. The plural, however, may not be mistaken for a narrow conception of the subject matter as institutionalised “religions” only, disregarding other phenomena.
4) In my use of the distinction between “religious” and “secular” I follow Jensen and Rothstein 2000:7–8, referring to Geertz (2000a:21) in the same volume, who argues for a “non-sectarian, non-religious study of religion” based upon “methods,
In order to enter the relevant educational debates and fields related to school education about religions, the study of religions needs to develop didactics. There is a difference between starting to think from a particular model of RE, asking what the study of religions may contribute to it, and starting to think from the discipline of the study of religions, asking what it has to offer for school education about religions, in general as well as in specific contexts. This article is an attempt to do the latter. For this purpose, three tasks for didactics of the study of religions are outlined: (1) analysis of existing models of education about religion, (2) development of concepts for education about religion, and (3) engagement in practical issues related to education about religions. It is argued that we need to deal with these tasks within the academic study of religions, rather than delegating them to educationists from other academic backgrounds.

1. Analysis of Existing Models of Education about Religion

Education about religion and religious plurality takes place in various contexts. Recently, the study of different religions has become an element of school education in more and more countries (Jackson 2004). An important presupposition for the study of religions to find its own position among the variety of approaches to teaching and learning about religion in schools is an analysis and critique of existent models from a study-of-religions point of view. In which contexts does learning about different religions take place? What are the epistemological frameworks in which religion and religious plurality are discussed? Starting from the general character of the academic discipline of the study of religions, a distinction between religious and secular educational contexts is crucial. If the study of religions is understood as a secular discipline which does not support any religious position over another, it cannot — neither at school nor at university levels —

theories and models developed in the human and social sciences.” Even though it may ultimately be arguable, this distinction is important for a first orientation in the field of religious education, where a distinction between religious and secular approaches to education about religions is crucial. For an account of the general problems concerning the concept “secular,” see Brittain’s (2005) discussion of Talal Asad’s rejection of it.
advocate any religious approach to religion. Therefore, while RE offered by religious communities is an interesting field of study, the study of religions as a discipline cannot actively support it, as this would mean to support the particular religious community which offers it. However, if education about religions is offered in secular educational frameworks (for example, universities, schools, or museums), independently from education within religious communities, the study of religions comes into focus as the academic discipline to which this kind of RE is most closely related. This latter kind of RE can be regarded as a direct field of application for didactics of the study of religions.

Models of Education about Religion and Religious Plurality in Europe: Integrative vs. Separative

Much has been written about the landscape of religious education in Europe (e.g. Schreiner 2000, 2005; Jensen 1999, 2005; Willaime 2007a). Generally, “religious education” is regarded as a generic term, which includes all kinds of education into, about and from religion — from confessional instruction within religious traditions to secular education programmes about different religions at public educational institutions. In this wide field, keeping in mind our interest in didactics of the study of religions, is it helpful to concentrate on the question of how teaching and learning about different religions takes place in schools in Europe. This allows a more focused study of the different frameworks for our particular field of interest: the representation of religious plurality in school education about religion.

If we approach the broad field of RE with the question how teaching and learning about different religions takes place, the common distinction between “confessional” and “non-confessional” RE may be supplemented with another distinction. From an educational point of view, it is useful to distinguish between integrative and separative approaches to education about religion (Alberts 2006:267, 2007:324). Integrative approaches to education about religion are designed for groups of pupils with various religious or non-religious backgrounds. Independently from their or their parents’ religious or non-religious orientation, pupils learn together about religion, religions and religious diversity. In separative approaches, by contrast, pupils are separated according to their or their parents’ religious orientation. Pupils who do
not belong to any of the religious groups that offer religious education at their school, may normally either choose an alternative secular subject, like “ethics” (e.g. in some federal states of Germany) or “philosophies of life” (e.g. in Norway before integrative RE was introduced), or they may take part in religious education of a religious community to which they do not belong. Thus, in separative approaches, teaching and learning about different religions takes place in separate groups. It is organised by religious communities in cooperation with schools and educational institutions (i.e. “confessional RE”) or, for the children who do not wish to participate in confessional RE, in an additional alternative subject.

In Europe, integrative religious education is sometimes included in school curricula as an individual school subject, for example, religion-skunskap (literally: knowledge about religion) in Sweden, religious education in England, kristendoms-religions- och livssynskunskap (KRL, literally: knowledge about Christianity, religions and views of life) in Norway, Religion und Kultur (religion and culture) in the Canton of Zurich in Switzerland, or religion in the Danish upper secondary school. In some other countries, integrative religious education appears as a learning dimension of other school subjects like history or geography. This is, for example, the case in France, where the responsibility of the school for the communication of knowledge about religions has been acknowledged quite recently (Debray 2002; Willaime 2007b), or in many schools in the Netherlands, where the compulsory learning area geestelike stromingen (spiritual traditions) is often realised as an aspect of other school subjects rather than in a subject of its own (Wiertz 1996; Avest, Bakker et al. 2007). Separative religious education can be found, for example, in schools in Belgium, Finland and Germany. In the separative approach, teaching about different religions and worldviews is regarded as a part of confessional religious education or the above-mentioned secular alternative subjects.

Educational justifications for integrative vs. separative models of education about religion differ considerably. Arguments for integrative

---

5) For an evaluation of approaches to education about religion in Australia and South Africa, see the articles of Goldburg and Chidester in this issue.
6) See the articles by Jensen, Revell and Frank and Bochinger in this issue for more information on integrative RE in Denmark, England and Switzerland.
approaches emphasise the importance of learning together to deal with differences and religious diversity, often from primary or even preschool levels, and frequently regard integrative RE as a cornerstone of education in secular democracies (Hull 2002; Hartmann 2000:230). Arguments for separative religious education, including separative education about different religions, tend to start from a religious perspective on education. Religions, and in particular the established Christian churches, are regarded as indispensable sources of value also in so-called “secular” societies. Therefore, religious instruction or “confessional RE” has its place in state schools (see e.g. Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 1996; Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 1994).

However, as religious freedom includes the right not to participate in religious activities, alternative subjects for those children who do not belong to an established religion which organises RE in schools have been introduced. The original idea behind these subjects is to communicate values also to non-religious children who do not attend confessional RE. Therefore, these alternative subjects normally do not have the word “religion” in their title, and the idea is that they deal with values, philosophy and related topics minus everything that has to do with religion.

When it comes to the study of different religions as part of the school curriculum, the inconsistencies of the separative approach, which reduces school religious education to a kind of religious and moral instruction, within secular educational systems becomes apparent. If the study of different religions is integrated in the separative approach to RE, representatives of the religious communities responsible for RE are given authority not only to teach their own religion, but also to teach about other religions from their religious point of view, even if they have only little or no academic knowledge about other religions than their own. If there is no additional non-confessional integrative RE, children will only learn about other religions from the perspective of the religious community whose RE they attend. Furthermore, when

---

7) For a study of integrative religious education at preschool levels, see Dommel 2007.
8) For example, “Werte und Normen” (values and norms) in Lower Saxony, Germany.
9) For an analysis of the position of the secular alternative subjects to confessional RE in Germany, see Lott 1998:46–53.
it comes to communicating knowledge about different religions, even alternative subjects can no longer leave out "religion" and deal only with philosophies and secular ideologies, which the separative approach has allocated to them. Therefore, the study of different religions has been given teaching time in most alternatives to RE and a study of different religions has recently been integrated in teacher training programmes for these alternative subjects, so that these now provide some space for teaching and learning about different religions. However, in confessional RE, which is still regarded as the norm in separative approaches, learning about religious diversity from teachers who have actually studied different religions in depth and have acquired theoretical and methodological knowledge about dealing with religious diversity is not possible (cf. Alberts 2007:347–352; Jensen 2002).

**Integrative Religious Education**

In contrast to separative-confessional education about religion, which, as part of the activities of a religious community, is an object of study but not a field of application for the academic study of religions, integrative religious education can be regarded as a direct field of application. In secular state schools, if freedom of and from religion is respected, integrative RE involves a study of different religions from a non-religious point of view. It is designed for pupils with various religious and non-religious backgrounds. Therefore, like in the academic study of religions, the general framework for integrative RE cannot be religious, but needs to start from a secular (though, of course, not secularist) educational approach to religious diversity, which does not privilege any religious perspective.

An analysis of existing models of integrative religious education may serve to identify important factors for the development of didactics of the study of religions. Apart from the key content-related issues, the organisational frameworks for integrative RE need to be considered. What kind of external factors shape the subject? In order to answer this

---

10) "Alternative subjects," as micro-integrative models within a generally separative approach, may be included in the study of integrative RE, even though it has to be kept in mind that these are not truly integrative (i.e. for all children of a class), but are designed for the non-religious "rest."
question it is necessary to study the general legal and organisational frameworks, including international conventions, constitutions, school laws and regulations. With respect to the general character and the contents of the subject, the following issues seem particularly important: aims of integrative RE, the notion of religion, the representation of religions, and the notion of education. A study of these issues involves research referring to different methodologies and sources. The study of written and material sources includes, for example, legal documents, syllabuses, course outlines for teacher training, academic concepts for integrative RE, and teaching material. Furthermore, the non-academic discourse about integrative RE, including statements by politicians and representatives of religious communities in various media, is an important field of analysis, as it tends to be more influential in public discourse than scholarly contributions. Empirical research about integrative RE involves, for example, observations in fields like teacher training, classroom research, and interviews with various agents related to the subject, including teachers and pupils.

In my own research, I have analysed written sources (including regulations, syllabuses, academic literature and textbooks) related to integrative RE in Europe, with a particular emphasis on England and Sweden, which both have a long tradition of integrative RE as an ordinary school subject from primary (and partly even preschool) to secondary school levels (see Alberts 2006, 2007).

The organisational frameworks for integrative RE in England and Sweden differ considerably. In England, despite recent tendencies towards centralisation and standardisation in the educational system and RE (UK Parliament 1988; SCAA 1994; QCA 2004), RE remains to a great extent a matter of local responsibility. The syllabuses are negotiated between representatives of religions and educational institutions. Thus, religious communities are regarded as important partners for integrative RE. The Church of England has a special position among the religious communities which are invited to contribute to the syllabus for a particular local area. It forms a group of its own in the agreed syllabus committee, while all other religious communities together are included in a second group. The third and fourth group are representatives of teachers and the local education authority. Since all four groups of the committee need to approve of an agreed syllabus for the local
area, the religious communities forming one of the groups, and the Church of England with its own group in particular, are given great responsibility for RE. In fact, they have the right of veto in curriculum development. The final decision about the syllabuses, and thus about the contents of RE, lies not with educationalists, but is negotiated between representatives of religions and educational institutions. Therefore, religious interpretations of religion and religious plurality (as opposed to secular educational positions) are frequently reflected in agreed syllabuses, despite the attempt to provide a framework for RE which is acceptable to pupils with various religious and non-religious backgrounds.11

In Sweden, by contrast, syllabuses for RE are a national matter. They are made by Skolverket, the National Agency of Education, just as the syllabuses for other school subjects. The individual religious communities are not part of the process of creating the syllabuses. The school subject religionskunskap is an ordinary obligatory secular school subject. Therefore, it has no special status in the general school curriculum. However, in Sweden and elsewhere, if religious communities are not formally taking part in the creation of syllabuses, this does not necessarily have to mean that they do not have any influence at all. Like in other matters, religious communities influence political and educational decisions in different ways, be it by lobbying or simply by the fact that important positions in the political or educational system are held by their members.12

Examples of the Notion of Religion and the Representation of Religions in Approaches to Integrative Religious Education

At the level of academic concepts for integrative RE, there is great diversity in England. There is no standard approach to RE, but different approaches influence RE in England in various ways, despite the rather uniform national framework and model syllabuses, which have also had an impact on the locally agreed syllabuses. Therefore, if we intend to analyse the notion of religion and representation of religions in English RE, we cannot speak of “the English model” in general, but need to

11) For this problem, see the article by Revell in this issue.
12) For this issue in Norway, see Thomassen 2006:260.
study more closely the individual approaches. In the following, I would like to highlight the differences between three approaches to RE in England,\(^{13}\) before I compare these to an influential Swedish model.

In the *experiential approach*, which is presented in a handbook for teachers (Hammond, Hay et al. 1990), religion is, like in the traditional phenomenology of religion, regarded as an expression of the experience of the sacred (ibid. 10). Like in Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (1969 [1917]) an acknowledgement of one’s own religious experience is regarded as a prerequisite for understanding other religions. The exercises suggested for RE aim at empathising with the “realm of religious experience” (Hammond, Hay et al. 1990:13). The study of individual empirical religions is not part of the learning model suggested in this approach. Rather, the experiential approach is seen as a compensation for the neglect of religious experience in the “world religions school,” which is “unable to convey the fascination of a faith” and in which the affective dimension “is wholly ignored as the passion of belief is dispassionately presented” (ibid. 21). While the authors see a place for the “world religions school” in RE, which “ought to offer both the variety and openness of the descriptive approach and also some real sense of the spiritual experience which lies behind the wide spectrum of belief and practice,” they regard their own approach as a contribution to that second, more “confessional” part of RE, as “it is this sense of experience which is essential if the real nature of religion is to be grasped” (ibid. 21). However, as the experience with similar positions by Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Heiler and others has shown, this approach to religion, which presupposes the universality of the holy behind all religious phenomena, is religious itself and, as a particular religious view on the plurality of religions, contradicts many other religious positions on that issue, let alone secular ones (Waardenburg 1992; McCutch-eon 2000). Therefore, it can neither be the framework for the secular academic study of religions, nor for integrative RE as an ordinary subject for pupils with different religious and non-religious backgrounds, if religious freedom (in particular, the right to education from a non-religious point of view) is respected. In an integrative RE context, the

\(^{13}\) These three models are just a selection from influential approaches to RE in England. For an introduction to more approaches see Grimmitt 2000; Jackson 2004; and Alberts 2007.
project team's programme of “de-indoctrination” from the dominant secular paradigm in a society where “a kind of cultural brainwashing” tends to make people whose religious experience appears to contradict “official” reality suppress it (Hammond, Hay et al. 1990:15), in fact turns into a programme of re-indoctrination into another unquestioned paradigm, i.e. the religious position that the experience of “the sacred” lies at the heart of all religion.14

A number of other approaches to integrative RE, which do not fall back into confessional positions, have been developed in the English context. They take into account the requirements of a mixed classroom, in which a religious position cannot be the framework for integrative RE. From a study-of-religions point of view, these approaches are not only interesting as an object of research, but also as models for the development of didactics of the study of religions. The interpretive approach, for example, developed at the University of Warwick by Robert Jackson and his team (e.g., Jackson 1997), shows impressively that education about religions from a non-religious point of view does by no means need to be “clinical or sterile,” as the experiential approach implies (Hammond, Hay et al. 1990:21). The notion of religion and representation of religions in the interpretive approach build on a critique of the traditional phenomenology of religion (favouring Jacques Waardenburg’s “new-style phenomenology”), a critical evaluation of Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s distinction between “faith” and “tradition,” and methods developed in recent social and cultural anthropology. Religion is studied on three interrelated levels: the individual, groups to which the individual belongs, and the wider religious tradition (Jackson 1997). A special focus of the interpretive approach is religion among children in Great Britain. Fieldwork among children of different religious backgrounds in Great Britain (for example, Nesbitt 2002) is used as a basis for textbooks for RE. In these textbooks, interpretive strategies are suggested by which the pupils may engage with the material, referring to individual children from a particular religious tradition in relation to the groups they belong to and the wider religious tradition. In this approach, the lives and ideas of children are given particu-

14) For a criticism of the experiential approach see also Mott-Thornton 1996; Wright 1996.
lar attention. Furthermore, in RE, the pupils are asked to relate what they have studied to their own lives. However, they are not asked to approach religious plurality from a religious point of view, but the framework for the representation of religions remains secular.

The interpretive approach offers interesting strategies of overcoming stereotypical representations of religions in RE. However, despite Robert Jackson’s reflective use of the concept “world religion,” the approach in general can be said to operate within a framework which still regards the constructs of “religious traditions” as the focus of reference, even if their internal diversity is acknowledged in the empirical study of individuals and membership groups (cf. Erricker 2000:30).15 Children from particular “traditions” are selected for the textbooks about “Hindus,” “Christians” or “Muslims.” Replying to this criticism and recent debates about the notion of religion in the academic study of religions, Jackson, in his approach for RE, prefers a revised phenomenology, trying to portray religions in their own terms, connected by family resemblance and transcendental reference (Waardenburg 1978; Flood 1999), to postmodern deconstructions of “religion” or approaches which regard the study of religions as reducible to cultural studies (Fitzgerald 2000).16

Postmodern criticism of the notion of religion is taken up in another approach to RE in England, the narrative approach developed by Clive and Jane Erricker. Referring to Lyotard’s pragmatics of narrative knowledge, Clive and Jane Erricker criticise the notion of “tradition” in RE contexts and regard the representation of religions in RE as the reproduction of the grand narratives that religious communities have produced about themselves. They identify the following as the principle question with regard to integrative RE: is “learning measured according to our knowledge and understanding of grand narratives; in the case of religious education these would be the belief systems Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism etc.,” or do we “understand them as constructions with political purposes, in the context of which they make truth claims” (Erricker and Erricker 2000a:194)? In his analysis of

15) For a recent critique of the notion of “world religions,” see Masuzawa 2005.
16) This position was presented by Robert Jackson in his keynote lecture at the conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) in Bremen in September 2007. See also Jackson’s contribution in this issue.
common practice of RE, Clive Erricker concludes that the way religions are represented in RE serves the interests of the ideological orthodox, conservative traditions. What is studied is what religious authorities wish to be acknowledged as representations of themselves. Thus, religious systems are often represented as intrinsically valuable. The metanarrative underpinning any such representation itself is, however, never contested (Erricker 2000:30–31). Erricker argues from an educational perspective that rather than continuing to reproduce maps of religions which act in the self-interest of orthodoxies and their truth claims, trying to gain hegemony over both deviance (heterodoxy) and secularity, it would be adequate to study from a meta-level what purposes the concepts “tradition” and “orthodoxy” serve (ibid. 32). This transformation of religious education into something broader would place it in a more appropriate educational perspective, which is concerned with human narratives rather than doxic truths or the teaching of “world religions,” and thus make the subject inclusive rather than exclusive, and performative rather than reactive (Erricker and Erricker 2000b: 131).

Contrary to England, where the general character of school religious education and its relation to moral and spiritual education, which is regarded as an aim of the school in general,17 remains contested, the secular character of integrative RE is openly embraced in Sweden. In Sweden, the concepts livsåskådning (view of life) and livstolkning (interpretation of life) serve as a map of the subject matter for RE (Almén 2000; Hartmann 2000). Other than the term “world religions,” which is rather prominent in English discourse about RE, the livsåskådningsapproach enables a more open concept of the field, including, for example, indigenous and new or smaller religions, religion beyond institutionalised religious systems and non-religious worldviews. Avoiding to put much emphasis on the religious vs. secular distinction (though not avoiding a study of the discussions about this distinction) helps to avoid a (religious) representation of religions as institutions of moral values which secular worldviews lack. Instead, religious and secular worldviews alike are studied with respect to ethical questions, which

17) Section 1.2 of the Education Reform Act states that the school in general should promote the “spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils” (UK Parliament 1988).
play a central role in Swedish RE, with a particular focus on contemporary issues and challenges (Skolverket 2000).

The above examples of concepts for integrative RE are concerned with the same kind of question: where to start from when we study religion/s in an educational framework? The examples show that, in school RE and elsewhere, inevitably we have to start to look at religions from one particular perspective. However, the first important distinction is between a religious starting point (like religious experience in the experiential approach), which is unacceptable for integrative RE within a secular educational framework, and a secular starting point (like the livsåskådnings-approach), which is needed for integrative RE. Even though the Swedish livsåskådnings-approach has its roots in liberal Protestant concepts of religion, it is not itself a religious starting point for RE. Views of life can be studied empirically, contrary to the presupposed universality of the experience of the holy as main characteristic of "religion" in the experiential approach. The concept livsåskådnings helps to map a field of study for RE, but does not provide a distinction between religion and not-religion. On the contrary, it applies a functional approach to religion, without claiming to provide the essential characteristic of "religion." It can be supplemented with other approaches to religion or religions, which have emerged in different cultural contexts or in the study of other religions than Christianity. Furthermore, the concept livsåskådnings can integrate the levels of different agents, including individuals, groups and institutions. Moreover, as a framework for RE, it may be flexible enough to integrate postmodern criticism of traditional notions of religion, and leave room for a critical study of the (meta-)narratives that religious institutions have produced about their "traditions."

18) For example, it resembles Paul Tillich’s theory of religion which claims that religions provide answers to existential questions (Tillich 1956).

19) Here the same kind of criticism applies which has been put forward against, for example, Rudolf Otto’s, Friedrich Heiler’s or Mircea Eliade’s ideas about the universality of the holy as a basis of any religious experience. See e.g. McCutcheon 2000; Waardenburg 1992.
2. Development of Concepts for Education about Religion

The situation in Europe and elsewhere shows that various concepts for education about religion and religions exist. Traditionally, these concepts have been developed within religious traditions and present approaches to religious plurality from the perspective of a particular religious tradition. Recently, in countries where such a school subject exists, concepts for integrative religious education have been developed also outside religious communities, for example, in institutes of education. Frequently, concepts for integrative RE are some kind of compromise between religious perspectives on religious plurality and secular educational approaches. This is due to the fact that, normally, educationalists have little professional knowledge about religions and approach religious communities and their educational institutions in order to develop contents for integrative RE.

The crucial question is, however, whether religious communities are the right partners for the development of concepts for secular integrative RE. From an educational perspective, it is important for the pupils to get to know the groups and worldviews that they are supposed to learn about. However, given the diversity of points of view on religion and religious diversity and the secular character of the subject, no religious position may determine the general character of integrative RE. Religious positions are the object of integrative RE, but cannot provide the framework for the representation of any religion, let alone religious diversity, in this school subject. Nevertheless, insider-accounts of their own tradition do have a place in integrative RE. They are part of the subject matter and need to be studied by the pupils. However, they may differ from other accounts of this tradition and, in particular, from non-religious approaches to that tradition. These tensions between different accounts of religion and religious diversity need to be studied in RE, if the subject is to serve the general emancipatory task of educational institutions which intend to educate responsible citizens. Therefore, a secular educational framework, with neither a religious nor an anti-religious agenda, is needed for integrative RE.

20) This is, for example, institutionalised in the procedure for the creation of syllabuses for RE in England. It is also the case in Germany when theologies are regarded as partners for the study of religions in the secular alternative subjects which are compulsory for pupils who do not take part in RE (cf. Lott 1998:48).
It took the institutionalised academic study of religions more than one-hundred years to distinguish between (explicitly or implicitly) religious and non-religious accounts of religion and this matter remains contested to this date (McCutcheon 2003; Jensen and Rothstein 2000; Fitzgerald 2000). It seems unlikely that educationalists designing concepts for integrative RE, without the help of the study of religions, will be able to find answers to the questions about an adequate notion of religion and representation of religions in only a few years. Due to the virtual absence of the study of religions in many debates about RE in secular societies, its knowledge about theory and methodology in the study and representation of different religions has only rarely been transferred to school contexts. Therefore, many approaches to religion in schools still build on a notion of religion which was popular in the academic study of religions in the first half of the 20th century, but has been found inappropriate in secular educational contexts.21 Expertise in the study of religions is needed for education about religion also in schools. Therefore, the study of religions needs to develop concepts for school education about religion as a part of general didactics of the study of religions.

In the development of concepts for education about religion from a study-of-religions point of view, we may distinguish between two different kinds of concepts:

(a) Starting from an understanding of the study of religions as an academic discipline, independent from particular institutional contexts and restrictions, we need to develop concepts for education about religion/s independently from external factors: didactics of the study of religions as it should be from an academic point of view, based on research in the study of religions and education. We need to find a position towards didactics within our discipline. This is necessary also in order to help to further develop existing approaches so that they may approximate this ideal.

21) For example, a Swedish textbook for RE presents the universality of the holy, as proposed by Otto or Söderblom, as a starting point for the study of religions in school RE, see Rodhe and Nylund 1998:23–26.
(b) Since education about religions does not take place in the “ideal” surroundings which scholars of religion may imagine, it is, furthermore, necessary to develop concepts for education about religion/s in particular contexts, taking account of external factors like national or international regulations, constitutions, school laws etc.: didactics of the study of religions as it can be in particular social and political contexts. However, we need to keep in mind that these external factors are not universal natural laws. Constitutions, regulations, school laws etc. have been made by somebody, most likely without consultation with scholars of religion. It is another task for scholars in the study of religions to participate in the consultation processes that precede decisions shaping the external factors on which education about religion/s de facto depends.

(a) Didactics of the Study of Religions as it Should be from an Academic Point of View

Concepts for integrative RE which build on didactics of the study of religions are designed for secular educational contexts with mixed classes of pupils with various religious and non-religious backgrounds. The impartial approach to religions should be reflected in the name of the school subject, which means that this name should refer to religion or religions in general, without naming a particular religion and thereby emphasising it on the cost of others. Examples of adequate names are the Swedish religionskunskap or German Religionskunde (knowledge about religion). The English term “religious education” is slightly ambiguous, as it may be taken to imply a religious character of the subject. Similarly, the connotation of simply “religion” may be ambiguous in some contexts where “religion” used to be the name for confessional religious instruction. If integrative RE is regarded as part of a broader subject, this may be reflected in names like Religion und Kultur (in the Canton of Zurich in Switzerland) or Lebensgestaltung-Ethik-Religionskunde (“Shaping life, ethics, knowledge about religion” in the federal state of Brandenburg in Germany).

There are a number of other organisational issues in which didactics of the study of religion needs to find its own position(s). However, in the following, I would like to address what I think are key issues for any concept of integrative RE: the notion of religion, the representation of
religions and the notion of education. As we have seen earlier, the notion of religion is contested in approaches to religious education. Didactics of the study of religions needs to position itself in this debate. In relation to debates about theory and methodology in the study of religions, we may ask where on the scale between classical phenomenological approaches to RE at one end and a complete deconstruction of “religion” at the other end didactics of the study of religions may find its place. Without any doubt, classical phenomenological approaches with their implicit or explicit universalist theological presuppositions, cannot serve as a framework for the study of religions in integrative RE, as this would mean an abuse of educational authority for a particular religious end, introducing pupils into an unquestioned religious paradigm, which contradicts the views of many religious and non-religious people.

If the well-known problems of the classical phenomenology of religion are addressed and avoided, a comparative study of religions in schools can, in fact, be a valuable contribution to the general educational task of the school. However, care needs to be taken in order not to introduce pupils to another unquestioned paradigm. Therefore, the debates about theory and methodology in the study of religions are very relevant for didactics. The general framework for integrative RE needs to be critical and broad enough in order to leave room for questioning one’s own presuppositions about the notion of religion and the representation of religions. Without any doubt, teachers need to take a number of decisions concerning the epistemological framework in which they represent religions. However, communicating these processes and the implications of these decisions to the pupils are important tasks for the teachers if they do not want to abuse their educational authority. With respect to the notion of religion, in didactics we do not have to solve the general problems the academic study is confronted with, for example, the fact that there is no universally accepted concept of religion. However, the implications of recent research in the study of religions need to be considered in concepts for integrative RE. This means, for example, that postcolonial critique, feminist criticism, and the postmodern deconstruction of religion (see, for example, Joy 2001; 22)

22) For a detailed outline of my position on these issues, see Alberts 2007:353–87.
Warne 2000; Geertz 2000b) need to be acknowledged. The latter, for example, does not mean that there is no place any more for the subject integrative RE, because its subject matter has been deconstructed. On the contrary, these processes and criticisms of traditional notions of religion which used to serve as frameworks for the representation of religions, need to be taken up in education about religions. After all, all these discourses which have been criticised and deconstructed, are still very influential in society and, therefore, still need to be studied. In the long run, this may very well result in a revision of curricula, particularly with respect to the selection of phenomena to be studied in RE. Here, a critical revision of the world-religions paradigm as framework for RE, for example, may help to broaden the scope of the subject and include phenomena such as non-institutionalised spirituality, civil religion, new, smaller or indigenous religions or other worldviews, which have often been excluded in frameworks based on world-religions typologies. Furthermore, postmodern criticism may serve as a critical corrective for the representation of religions in RE, addressing problems concerning the conscious or unconscious reproduction of grand narratives.

The issues concerning the search for a concept of religion which may serve as the basis for an adequate representation of religions in RE are closely related to the general question of what kind of concept of education didactics of the study of religions may be based upon. There is a great discrepancy between academic concepts of education, referring, for example, to individual self-determination of life and meaning, participation in decision-making about cultural, economic, social and political issues, and solidarity in order to grant self-determination and participation also to all other people (Klaflki 2001), and concepts of education put forward by particular lobbies (be they driven by political, religious or economic interests), which reduce education to the acquisition of skills needed for their particular aims. The study of religions, as an academic discipline, needs to develop an approach to teaching about religions which builds on academic concepts of education. If education is not reduced to an acquisition of standardised knowledge, but is related to the development of consciousness and the ability to critically assess one’s previous understanding, for example, of religion, in relation to new information, the importance of a generally open and critical framework for the representation of religions in RE becomes obvious.
The contested methodological issues need to be communicated to the pupils in RE so that they can take part in these debates. Therefore, integrative RE cannot be reduced to an acquisition of standardised knowledge about “world religions.” An introduction to the debates about religion and religions in contemporary societies is much more important. This enables the pupils to make up their own minds about the grand narratives that are produced about religious “traditions.” The critical and emancipatory impetus lying at the heart of critical educational theory (Adorno 1970; Heydorn 1995; Klafki 2001), which is based on critical social theory (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno 1998), needs to be acknowledged as an integral part of the subject. Therefore, in order not to introduce the pupils to unquestioned paradigms, the crucial theoretical and methodological questions need to be addressed in RE.

Another contested issue where didactics of the study of religions needs to find its own position is the debate about the aims of integrative RE. Frequently, two aspects of aims of integrative RE are distinguished: *learning about religions* and *learning from religion.* While *learning about religions* is uncontroversial from a study-of-religions point of view, *learning from religion* is a more delicate issue. What does it mean? It is related to the general educational task of the subject and of the school in general. In the national model syllabuses in England, for example, learning from religion is specified somewhat vaguely as “including the ability to: give an informed and considered response to religious and moral issues; reflect on what might be learnt from religions in the light of one’s own beliefs and experience; identify and respond to questions of meaning within religions” (SCAA 1994:5). In the national syllabus for the Swedish *grundskola* (elementary school), the aim of RE is introduced as follows:

The subject of Religion contributes to developing the ability to understand and reflect over oneself, one’s life and surroundings and develop a preparedness for acting with responsibility. Working through existential and religious issues and considering existence from an ethical perspective, is part of a personal development process. Every individual reflects over such issues and needs to acquire

---

23) See, for example, the national model syllabuses or the non-statutory national framework for RE in England: SCAA 1994:5; QCA 2004:11. For the Swedish debate about aims of integrative RE see Härenstam 2000:145–164.
concepts from traditions, language and symbols to find meaning in those issues they face in life. (Skolverket 2000)

The formulation *learning from religion* emphasises the educational value of its counterpart *learning about religions*. In an integrative RE context, however, it may be asked whether or not the concept learning from religion privileges religious worldviews over secular ones, presupposing an inherent value of religious traditions which secular worldviews lack, for example with respect to moral questions. Moreover, one may doubt that learning from religion has its place in a generally secular framework, as it may imply a religious character of the learning process, asking the pupils to accept religious frameworks when they articulate their own positions. The problems is that the formulation *learning from religions* is so vague that it may be interpreted as secular as well as religious. For example, Robert Jackson’s idea of *edification*, a different view on the familiar after having been challenged by the unfamiliar, which identifies reflexivity as an integral part of interpretive processes in RE, can be regarded as a secular interpretation of learning from religion, acknowledging that studying other ways of life and reflecting about what has been studied cannot be separated from each other (Jackson 1997:130–134). Some formulations in the English national model syllabuses, however, imply a religious character of learning from religions, for example, when “synthesis,” including “linking significant features of religion together in a coherent pattern; connecting different aspects of life into a meaningful whole,” is regarded as a central skill of RE (SCAA 1994:5).

Considering this ambiguity of the formulation *learning from religion*, for didactics of the study of religions I would like to suggest to replace it with the formulation *learning from the study of religions*, in order to exclude a religious interpretation of this aim of integrative RE, but to emphasise, at the same time, the general analytical skills which the study of religions fosters and to refer to the reflexive aspect of the subject. The latter may be necessary in order to defend the subject against the popular argument that a study of different religions within a secular framework was unrelated to the lives and own experiences of the pupils.24 *Learning from the study of religions* does not imply that

---

24 This is, for example, presupposed in Hammond, Hay et al. 1990, e.g. 21. For an analysis of this argument in the German context, see e.g. Lott 1998.
religions are institutions of moral superiority, but leaves room for an acknowledgement of the ambivalence of “religion.” Furthermore, it expresses more clearly the emancipatory approach to education, which involves a critical study of various phenomena and discourses, challenging previously unquestioned presuppositions.

(b) Didactics of the Study of Religions within the Constraints of External Factors

There are a number of external factors and constraints which influence the contexts in which didactics of the study of religion can actually be applied. Generally, like other educational issues, the character of integrative RE is negotiated between different stakeholders, resulting in different frameworks for learning about religion/s. These frameworks may contradict the principles of the study of religions, for example, with respect to the impartial treatment of different religions.

First, also apart from regulations concerning integrative RE, frameworks for school education in general may not really be secular. In England, for example, “spiritual development” is regarded as a task of school education in general (UK Parliament 1988). In other countries, particular religious traditions are named in school laws or other regulations as frameworks for education. This may be more implicit like in the Swedish national curriculum which mentions “ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism” as a reference for the values that the school should represent and impart (Skolverket 2006:3). In other countries, school laws interpret education in general as education within a particular religious tradition. In Norway, for example, the education act states:

The object of primary and lower secondary education shall be, in agreement and cooperation with the home, to help to give pupils a Christian and moral upbringing, to develop their mental and physical abilities, and to give them good general knowledge so that they may become useful and independent human beings at home and in society. (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2007a:§1–2)

Similarly, the school laws of several German federal states interpret school education in general as Christian education. Furthermore, on these grounds, Christian symbols and clothes are privileged while other religious items, most explicitly the Muslim headscarf, are banned from
classrooms (for example, Land Baden-Württemberg 2006 §38.2; Freistaat Bayern 2007: art. 59.2). Considering these school laws and regulations, the challenge for didactics of the study of religions and integrative RE is to establish a framework which is impartial with respect to religions in a context which is not impartial.

Second, teaching and learning about different religions may be organised within frameworks in which the study of religions appears merely as an aspect of other school subjects, for example in France or in many schools in the Netherlands. In these models it may be difficult to communicate basic distinctions in the study of religions (for example, between religious and non-religious views of "religion") to teachers and pupils who will teach and learn about religions merely as a part of, for example, history or geography. How can didactics of the study of religions be integrated in these approaches? A minimum requirement would be the inclusion of modules in the study of religions in the teacher training programmes for teachers of those subjects which comprise some study of religions. It may be doubted, however, that it is possible to communicate the complex theoretical and methodological issues as well as sufficient knowledge about religions in a by-programme and not an individual subject, at university as well as school levels.

Third, if there is integrative RE as an individual school subject, the regulations for this subject may privilege particular traditions, or draw a map of integrative RE which is quite different from what would be favourable from a study-of-religions point of view. For example, the English Education Reform Act states with respect to religious education that any newly agreed syllabus

shall reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain. (UK Parliament 1988, section 8.3)

Similarly, the syllabus for the obligatory subject Kristendoms-, religions- og livssynskunnskap (KRL) in Norway prescribes that 55% of teaching time should be dedicated to Christianity, 25% to Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam together, and the remaining 20% to philosophy and ethics (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2005:11). The privileged position of Christianity in the name Kristendoms-, religions- og livssynskunnskap
(KRL) is indicative of the generally privileged position of Christianity in this school subject.\textsuperscript{25}

This is also the case in the subject \textit{Unterricht in biblischer Geschichte auf allgemeinchristlicher Grundlage} (BGU, education in biblical history on a generally Christian basis), a non-confessional school subject taught in Bremen in Germany. This name goes back to a compromise in the year 1947, when the city of Bremen decided not to include confessional instruction in the normal school curriculum. The Department for the Study of Religions and Religious Education of the University of Bremen, which educates prospective teachers for BGU, interprets BGU as a study of different religions from a non-confessional point of view. Therefore, students with various religious or non-religious backgrounds may study at this department in order to become BGU teachers later.\textsuperscript{26} However, the Christian churches, which are consulted by the secular authority of education for the creation of syllabuses for BGU and help to organise the post-graduate school practice phases, interpret BGU as inter-confessional Christian education (e.g. Bremische Evangelische Kirche 2007). Therefore, there is disagreement about the question if, for example, Jewish or Muslim graduates from the teacher training programme may actually teach BGU, since the Christian churches regard being Christian as a prerequisite for that. The outcome of these debates between the university, the city of Bremen and the religious communities is still open and it may be possible that the courts will have to decide about the general character of BGU.

For didactics of the study of religions, these debates raise the question where there is a limit to accommodating imperfect conditions and legal frameworks of integrative RE. Certainly, if we want to get involved in teaching about religions in schools, some kind of compromise will be

\textsuperscript{25} Its bias in favour of Christianity was found incompatible with its compulsory status by the European Court of Human Rights (European Court of Human Rights 2007). In response to this decision, the Norwegian government has recently announced its intention to adapt the subject so that its compulsory status does not contradict human rights conventions of religious freedom any more (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2007b).

\textsuperscript{26} Cf. the Bachelor course, which forms the first part of the teacher training programme, Freie Hansestadt Bremen 2006.
unavoidable. If we supported integrative RE only in ideal surroundings, it would hardly be possible for us to support any model at all and, perhaps, prove that a study-of-religions approach is helpful in school contexts. If the study of religions does not claim its responsibility for integrative RE at all, other interest groups will be ready to take its place. Furthermore, in order to change the educational contexts towards more favourable conditions for teaching and learning about religions in schools, the study of religions needs to engage in these debates and make available its expertise in this field. However, I think we need a discussion about the limits beyond which we cannot support a model any more, because its bias fundamentally contradicts the principles of didactics of the study of religions. Clearly, the study of religions cannot support confessional models of teaching about religion, even though knowledge provided by the study of religions may be used in confessional RE. Therefore, with respect to integrative RE, an important question is whether the general framework excludes people on religious grounds. This is the case, for example, in the Hamburg model of integrative RE (“Religionsunterricht für Alle,” see Weiße 1996), which is designed for pupils of various religious and non-religious backgrounds, but may be taught independently only by teachers who belong to a Christian church (Link 2002:222). The same issue may become crucial in Bremen, should courts decide that teachers for BGU need to be Christians. This would probably result in a termination of the participation of the Department for the Study of Religions and Religious Education of the University of Bremen in teacher training for BGU, as this would fundamentally contradict the department’s approach to integrative RE and its interpretation of the school subject BGU.

Regarding cooperation under imperfect conditions, the question if the general framework allows for a non-religious impartial approach at all is decisive. In many national or regional contexts, there may be a variety of interpretations of integrative RE. If the general framework allows for it, didactics of the study of religions can contribute a secular approach which acknowledges the diversity of religious and non-religious backgrounds of the pupils and respects the rights to freedom of and from religion.

Didactics of the Study of Religions Beyond School Contexts

The focus of didactics of the study of religions is not limited to school contexts. There are other fields where it is needed. In fact, it relates to any
field where teaching and learning about religion takes place in secular environments. In higher education, it relates, for example, to programmes for the study of religion at universities. Furthermore, it is relevant for modules in the study of religion which are part of other programmes, for example, teacher training for history in countries where integrative religious education is included in the school subject history. In Europe, the restructuring of the university systems (e.g. the “Bologna process”) can be regarded as a particular challenge for didactics of the study of religions at this level. How are academic courses in the study of religions adapted to this changed environment? By what kind of programmes are our traditional courses replaced? On which notion of university education are these programmes based? This is another area where the comparative study and development of concepts for teaching and learning about religion falls within the realm of didactics of the study of religions. Furthermore, other institutions which are often regarded as cultural or political rather than educational, also serve the task of communicating knowledge about religions in secular environments. This is the case in museums which deal with religion, for example, the Religionskundliche Sammlung in Marburg in Germany. In this museum, knowledge about religions is communicated to the public with objects from different regions of the world. Furthermore, it is visited regularly by groups of teachers and pupils (Bräunlein 2004). In addition to this obvious field for didactics of the study of religions, it is also needed in museums which deal with religion or religions only among a number of other topics, but are not mainly museums of religions. Furthermore, monuments which communicate information about or interpretations of religions and religious diversity can be regarded as another field, just as other media which serve this function. In this respect, didactics of the study of religions can be regarded as one aspect of an applied study of religions, relating to the “expanding classroom” (see the article by David Chidester in this issue).

3. Engagement in Practical Issues Related to Education about Religion

Didactics of the study of religions is not limited to the study of models of education about religion and the development of concepts for this purpose at an academic level. Its field requires practical engagement in
various contexts relating to teaching and learning about religion/s in secular environments. In the following, I will briefly describe five areas which I think need to be particular foci of this engagement: teacher training, the development of teaching material, cooperation with various agents representing religion in society, cooperation with educational authorities, and participation in public and political debates about religion, education, and RE.

There are a number of tasks for teacher training in the study of religions. First, the study of religions needs to claim its place in teacher training for integrative RE as well as for the secular alternative subjects to confessional RE in separative contexts. Frequently, for these subjects, theologies rather than the study of religions are regarded as partners for teacher training, since they have much more experience with school didactics. These are fields where the study of religions still needs to communicate the relevance of its approach. In some contexts, however, for example for the subject religion in the Danish upper secondary school, this has been done quite successfully already (Jensen 2007). It is important that the study of religions develops teacher training programmes for integrative RE and “alternative” subjects to confessional RE from a clear study-of-religions point of view. Currently, these teacher training programmes are often not really based on didactics of the study of religions, but rather compromises with various interest groups. In face of the unsatisfactory situation of teaching and learning about different religions in many countries, the young field of didactics of the study of religions will profit immensely from international cooperation. A transfer of knowledge is necessary in order not to repeat the same debates again and again in each country and to counter the religiously motivated propaganda against integrative RE.27 In addition to teacher training programmes at universities, the study of religions needs to get involved in institutions which are responsible for more school-related training courses. So far, the responsibility of the study of religions often terminates once students get their university degrees and well-established religious communities take over. This is, for example, the case in Bremen where the study of religions is not involved in the second phase of teacher training for integrative RE. Supervision and

27) An overview of the latter in Germany can be found in Lott 1998:9–17.
support from the study of religions is needed also in postgraduate school practice phases. Furthermore, taking into account the large number of teachers of integrative RE who have no background in the study of religions, education courses for teachers are also needed in order to communicate the character of the subject and recent research insights to them and discuss together its applicability in schools. Concepts for teacher education and in-service training need to acknowledge the variety of school contexts, including preschool, primary school, secondary school, vocational school, evening school, and special schools.

The lack of adequate teaching material for integrative RE has often been noted (for example, Härenstam 1993; Westerman 1996; van der Velde 2007). However, there are impressive exceptions. For example, the textbooks produced by the Warwick team, based on the interpretive approach (e.g. Wayne, Everington et al. 1996), or the series Danske Verdensreligioner (Danish World Religions, cf. Jensen 2007:341–42), transfer expertise in the study of religions and its didactics to teaching material. Generally, the study of religions needs to contribute to the textbook market and train students to be able to write textbooks. For this task, students require knowledge in the study of religions and in didactics of the study of religions. However, teaching material is by no means restricted to textbooks, but includes a number of other media, not least films and virtual resources.

Another task for didactics of the study of religions is cooperation with various agents representing “religion” in societies. These include religious communities, but are not restricted to these. Among religious communities it may be important to establish trust for integrative RE based on the study of religions, for example regarding the communication of its methodological presuppositions, which are neither religious nor anti-religious. Furthermore, cooperation with religious communities is a basis for visits, which may be included in teacher training as well as integrative RE itself in order to enable encounters and direct contact with insiders of different traditions. However, for didactics of the study of religions it is crucial that it treats the different religious groups equally. This means, for example, that it cannot support the

28) This study is part of the European research project on Islam in textbooks, cf. Falaturi 1990.
privileges that well-established religions often have, particularly in RE contexts. Apart from religious communities, there are also other institutions, groups and individuals who represent religion. An open approach to religion requires openness for various areas where religion is represented in society in order not to limit “religion” to a selection of “world religions” or locally influential religious communities. We need to embark upon new fields where what we call “religion” matters in societies, for example, with respect to worldviews of people today and the beliefs and values which determine or guide their actions.

A fourth practical task for didactics of the study of religions is cooperation with educational authorities. The character of the rather young subject integrative RE needs to be explained to heads of schools, local and national education authorities, ministries of education etc. The study of religions needs to supply the kind of knowledge which is important for decisions in educational institutions. Just as the character of the academic study of religions is often misunderstood, so is the character of integrative RE. Scholars in the study of religions need to participate in consultation processes leading to the creation of laws, guidelines, syllabuses etc. on local, national and international levels. This has been done by most of the authors in this volume. Their work is, however, an exception rather than the rule in the academic study of religions.

My final point in this section is about the recognition of the social and political responsibility of the study of religions and its didactics to make the knowledge it produces available to society. Scholars of religion need to participate in political and public debates about religion, education and RE. Otherwise we support the notion that, above all, representatives of religious communities are to be regarded as specialists not only for their own religion (which is arguable in itself, considering the reproduction of religious authority this implies), but also for “religion” in general.

Conclusion

As shown above, teaching and learning about religion take place in a number of contexts, inside and outside educational institutions. The academic discipline of the study of religions cannot wait until ideal
fields of application in terms of surroundings for education about religion and religions exist in schools or elsewhere, before it develops a didactic branch. This would mean leaving education about religion/s beyond academia to people with other, possibly religious or anti-religious agendas, who do not have an academic background in the comparative study of religions.

In fact, even the university contexts in which our subject is based do very often not correspond to our self-understanding. Likewise, the study of religions cannot refrain from getting involved in the educational debates around teaching and learning about religions, trying to leave everything which has to do with education to educationalists and interpreting its own contribution merely as the provision of knowledge about details in the history of religions. Educationalists without any background in the study of religions are unlikely to understand the important distinctions which the study of religions has introduced. Therefore, rather than trying to assign the professional responsibility for education about religion/s to other stakeholders, the study of religions needs to develop its own didactics. We need scholars in the study of religions who, at the same time, have expertise in the fields of education and didactics and combine this expertise for didactics of the study of religions.

This does certainly not reflect the study of religions in its narrowest interpretation, regarding the production of knowledge solely as an end in itself and trying to be immune against any other normative interpretation. Delimitations from normative (e.g., religious or colonial) positions are important, but this does not mean that the study of religions has nothing to do with school contexts, which are, of course, normative, as they intend to educate the young generation into specific societies. Just as the university system, which incorporates the academic discipline of the study of religions, serves particular interests, the interests behind school education do not make an integration of the kind of knowledge that the study of religions produces into schools impossible. However, this knowledge is not just readily available detailed information about a selection of religions in which educators may be interested.

29 For example, when the integration of Departments for the Study of Religions in Faculties of Theology seems to imply that the general religious framework of the Faculty applies to the Study of Religions, too.
On the contrary, it cannot be separated from theoretical and methodological considerations about religion and religions. This applies to university as well as other educational contexts. Therefore, just as we do not leave the design of university programmes in the study of religions to external educationalists and just contribute information about religions, we need to get actively involved in the analysis and design of concepts for school education about religion/s, which includes participating in a number of practical issues, despite all delicate issues involved in the field of religion and education.

References


