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# **Ambiguity, politically: challenges for Religious Education in times of populism and political polarization. Theological and didactic perspectives**

von

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## *Abstract*

*Gerade in den gegenwärtigen Zeiten der Krise und der vielfältigen Infragestellung demokratischer Regeln und Prozesse ist die Demokratie wesentlich auf öffentliche Deliberation angewiesen und erfordert daher Lernprozesse und den Erwerb notwendiger Fähigkeiten im Umgang mit politischen Ambiguitäten. Für die Bildung und Kultivierung eines demokratischen Bewusstseins, das von erheblicher Bedeutung ist, um antidemokratischen Haltungen und Praktiken wirksam zu begegnen, muss religiöse Bildung eine spezifische Rolle und Verantwortung übernehmen. Ausgehend von einer grundsätzlich intersubjektiven Ausrichtung auf den Erwerb und die Kultivierung von Ambiguitätstoleranz leistet der Religionsunterricht einen spezifisch theologischen Beitrag, indem er Aspekte der Menschenwürde und Anerkennung des Anderen sowie der Gleichheit unabhängig von Geschlecht, Herkunft, Rasse oder Religion, zur Sprache bringt.*

*Especially in current times of crisis and various challenges to democratic rules and processes, democracy is fundamentally dependent on public deliberation and therefore requires processes of learning and acquiring the necessary skills in dealing with political ambiguities. For the formation and cultivation of democratic consciousness, which is of great urgency in order to oppose anti-democratic attitudes and practices effectively, religious education has to take up a specific role and responsibility. From a fundamentally intersubjective orientation towards the acquisition and cultivation of tolerance of ambiguity, religious education contributes specifically in a theological sense by raising aspects of human dignity and the recognition of the other, equality regardless of gender, origin, race or religion.*

*Schlagwörter: Demokratie, Populismus, Toleranz, Ambiguität, Würde, Religiöse Bildung, Religionsunterricht*

*Keywords: democracy, populism, tolerance, ambiguity, dignity, Religious Education*

## **Introduction<sup>1)</sup>**

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1) This article is an extended and actualized version of an article in German under the title "Demokratie/Populismus". In: Simojoki, H. / Körtner, U.H.J. / Rothgangel, M. (Hg.) (2022): Ethische Kernthemen. Lebensweltlich - theologisch-ethisch - didaktisch (Theologie für Lehrerinnen und Lehrer 4), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 74-84.

Democracy as a form and mode of operation in terms of rule, government and life itself is considered a natural feature of social life in societies where it has grown historically, is constitutionally guaranteed and is politically implemented. Nevertheless, democracy cannot be taken for granted. Rather, in order to achieve legitimacy and stability, it requires constant, often extremely small-scale shaping, as well as laborious processes of development, not to mention an attitude of trust and patience, or as Max Weber said for politics: „it is like slowly drilling through thick boards: with patience and passion“ (Weber, 1919, 66). This alone is the first fundamental ambiguity of all political life: ambiguity understood here as the fact and coexistence of a plurality of occasionally contradictory beliefs and truths (Bauer, 2011; 2018). Plurality is taken to mean „the fact that not man, but many men live on earth and populate the world.“ (Arendt, 2007, 17). The fact that people exist „in the plural“, according to Arendt, is a fundamental precondition of „the political“ and consequently of democracy – and at the same time it is part of this culture to build up, enhance and strengthen the competence of constructively dealing with this ambiguity.

Therefore, it is a characteristic of democratic life that „work on democracy“ and its different claims to truth takes place on many levels and in diverse forms. In addition to the classic democratic decision-making bodies, this includes a large number of other institutions and organisations that participate in shaping democratic life and that make burning issues, discussion processes and decisions publicly transparent.

It is of eminent political and also considerable pedagogical relevance for such a discursive and ambiguity-sensitive democratic basic attitude that individual citizens, and thus also children and young people, can participate in its shaping in an empowered way: „Only democracy offers people the chance to participate comprehensively in the formation of wills and decision-making and to take their affairs into their own hands.“ (Vorländer, 2020, 125).

For this to succeed, democracy is essentially dependent on learning and acquiring the adequate skills in dealing with factual ambiguities and contradictions. Tolerance of ambiguity (for the development of this term see Frenkel-Brunswik, 1996) can therefore be characterised by the „ability to perceive and endure diversity, contradiction, ambiguity and multiperspectivity, to seek them out, generate them, value them and deal creatively with the inevitable ambiguity of the world“ (Klessmann 2018, 48). In this respect, the cultivation of a democratic consciousness is considerably dependent on a legal system which provides the necessary educational opportunities and chances for participation on an equal footing. In this sense, all the principles of democratic coexistence are closely connected to the goals and practices of formal and non-formal school education, and thus also to the self-understanding and aims of religious education.

# 1 Educational challenges in times of populism and polarisation

Such an admittedly ideal image of democracy, tolerance of ambiguity and the educational practice conducive to it must be called to mind particularly clearly at present. In recent times, a series of developments and debates have emerged that have significantly called into question both the basic principles and the procedural mechanisms of the democratic system and have thus become a central issue for all educational practices.

This brings a second essential aspect of political ambiguity into view. To put it briefly: it seems as if there is hardly any space or sensitivity left for the factual ambiguities of political and social life. On the one hand, this is the case where a decline of classical democracy is stated: in the shadow of political orchestrations, the actual, real politics is accused of being made by elected governments and elites who primarily represent the interests of the private sector. On the other hand, movements such as Pegida or, in the parliamentary context of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), a form of right-wing populist fundamental criticism is emerging. Populist phenomena are a kind of identitarian and culture-warring self-assurance with exclusion dynamics according to a „friend-foe thinking“ (cf. Müller, 2016). In the context of the COVID19 pandemic, which has now lasted for more than two years, completely new manifestations of a democracy-sceptical and conspiracy-theoretical movement have emerged in the light of health policy measures and their contestation, which undoubtably significantly and presumably also fundamentally question the peaceful interaction of different political forces.

In connection with this, an increased moralisation of politics must be ascertained, which makes compromises more difficult to reach and limits the ability to act politically (cf. Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Accordingly and again another aspect of ambiguity, populism should not be understood as a countermovement to post-democratic tendencies, but rather leads primarily to their intensification (cf. Crouch, 2012; 2021).

Not least due to digital communication, this is at the same time often combined with antisemitic conspiracy allegations and anti-democratic radicalisation tendencies. In the guise of the supposedly unquestionable „disenfranchisement“ of the people and „ignorance of the actual will of the people“, this leads not only to defamation of the political and social „elites“, but also, at least indirectly, to fundamental questioning of the basic democratic principles, exacerbated by forms of articulation that are hardly manageable and that are even less controllable in digital terms.

In connection with the dimension of ambiguity, this means: intolerance of ambiguity is the „inability to bear ambiguity“ and the inability to „bear ambiguous and contradictory facts“, while „a rigid, inflexible, obsessive attitude prevails. In this context, nuances and complexities are rejected because they irritate people, a defensive tendency closely related to a negative attitude towards otherness and the rejection of the culturally

foreign.“ (Stangl, 2020).

In this respect, democracy is quite precarious. This is especially evident on a global scale in light of the fact that only around 8% of the world population live in functioning „full democracies“. A number of observations suggest that democracies can also die (cf. Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

For this reason, the formation and cultivation of democratic consciousness is currently of great urgency in order to counter such anti-democratic attitudes and practices effectively. For this cultivation of democratic maturity, media-critical education is necessary as early as childhood and adolescence: „For the alternative to all-explanatory conspiracy theories is not the uncritical acceptance and adherence to ‘official’ truth versions and measures, but the ability to critically and reflectively engage with them. This, however, presupposes the ability to endure uncertainty and ambiguity for a certain period of time. And this is precisely the basic definition of tolerance of ambiguity.“ (Lenz, 2021).

Therefore, there are considerable challenges for religious education, not only with regard to the standards of democratic coexistence, but also for dealing with populism, as well as antisemitic tendencies often associated with it. For a critical and at the same time in-depth examination of these phenomena, the specific potential of religious education must be intensively reflected upon and brought into play in a powerful and energetic way in pedagogical terms.

## **2 Theological-ethical perspectives**

The task of religious education for cultivation of democratic consciousness and criticism of anti-democratic basic attitudes requires, first of all, a historical and theological-ethical clarification. The historical course of events, especially in „official church“ writings, shows essential ethical-theological decisions which are therefore of programmatic, orientational and current relevance up to the present day. First of all, it must be said that, historically, German churches and theology have been extremely hesitant to enter into a positive relationship with the post-war democratic order. This long-lasting reticence is not least due to the fact that, for a long time, they did not know how to enter into a constructive relationship with a state that consciously renounced religious figures as justification for its constitutional principles. A theologically reflected acceptance of the overall democratic-pluralistic structure and its active support thus only came about many decades after the establishment of the democratic constitutional state. This took place in detail for the first time on the Protestant side in the so-called democracy memorandum (EKD, 1985).

Here the primary justification for a positive attitude towards democracy was seen - and this remains practically unchanged to the present day - in the constitutional foundation

of human dignity, which was consistently linked to the theological figure of the image of God. The compatibility of the democratically anchored principle of human dignity with the Christian image of man was worked out with the help of a basic anthropological-creative-theological figure. Also, through the basic epistemological figure of plural possibilities of interpreting Christian truth, space was created for a theologically and ethically based recognition of the plurality of political and social convictions, as well as plural truth claims.

In ecumenical terms, theological appreciation of democracy has been made clear in recent years in the form of several programmatic declarations. In these, „the churches encourage the appreciation of democracy and the use of its opportunities“ (Kirchenamt & DBK, 2006, 15) and here also show with theological justification the importance of Christian action for democracy. In addition, and with surprisingly strong acceptance of the concept of morality (Sittlichkeit), this has recently been taken further in terms of education: „Participation in the democratic dispute of opinions and the sense of helping to shape the community must be practised. This requires educational processes in which people theoretically understand and personally experience the value and dignity of democratic participation.“ (DBK & Kirchenamt, 2019, 49).

On the Protestant side, the preservation of human dignity can be explained in more detail through the fact that human dignity is understood in the context of Reformation theology as a „certainty of human dignity“ (Scheliha, 2013, 226) acquired in conscience. However, the contribution of such a theological-ethical interpretation in view of the abovementioned populist threats has hardly been reflected so far. The plea for a wise, „Christian virtue of patience“ in dealing with populism (Scheliha, 2018, 362), outlined in Reformation theology, as well as recent reflections about how the churches can deal with populism (cf. Nord & Schlag, 2021), should nevertheless be mentioned.

In theological-ethical and at the same time educationally relevant terms, reference should also be made to the memorandum „Consensus and Conflict“ (EKD, 2017). This is set against the backdrop of the debate about the refugee issue and the resulting intensified debate about belonging, as well as the associated political fundamentalisation tendencies. For the exchange of arguments, and through communicatively and legally regulated procedures, it requires „the courage to understand especially the controversial and difficult issues as a task of democratic judgement and political action and not to leave them to the power of the prevailing circumstances or the markets.“ (EKD, 2017, 19).

In this respect, theological ethics and churches would do well to avoid any gesture of omnipotence or to claim exclusive interpretive sovereignty in the guise of supposedly objective statements – at the same time, however, especially in the face of rampant populism, clear resistance must be offered wherever patterns of justification and activities of group-based misanthropy are an unmistakable danger.

## 3 Didactic perspectives

### 3.1 Didactic orientations

For the present context it is essential to mention that religious education has been dealing increasingly intensively with social issues and problems since the late 1960s. For the next decades, curricula and textbooks included topics with a relevance to politics and democracy as a fixed component of teaching and learning – not infrequently with a decidedly emancipatory and liberation-theological orientation. This was followed around the turn of the millennium by a certain cyclical slowdown in the political dimension of religious education. Theoretical treatments of the connection between religious and political education have only recently been intensified again, on the part of both Catholic and Protestant religious education (cf. Grümme, 2009; Schlag, 2010; Könemann 2016; Schlag 2016), most recently in a critical-emancipatory, interdisciplinary and at the same time ecumenical orientation (Grümme & Schlag 2019; Gärtner & Herbst, 2020). In this context, reference should be made to studies in religious education that take a closer look at ethical issues (cf. Lindner & Zimmermann, 2021), now also the ‘Fridays for Future’ movement (Bederna, 2019) and especially from the perspective of aspects of human dignity and human rights (cf. Schweitzer, 2011; Suhner, 2020; 2022).

In connection with the current debate on competences, relevant competence-oriented models can also be interpreted in terms of their democracy-relevant perspectives: as basic process-related competences of religious education, the target perspective here is formed by the ability to perceive and present, to interpret, to judge, to engage in dialogue, and to shape and act. Thematically relevant competences are «to communicate and cooperate respectfully with members of other religions and with people of other world views.» (Kirchenamt der EKD, 2010, 18)

Religious education in such a competence-oriented, democratically relevant and perspective which is critical of populism can at the same time tie in with the competences and standards of the pedagogical idea of avoiding overpowering and indoctrination. This is linked to the necessity of intersubjective learning processes: the experience of the concrete other as an equal counterpart makes it possible to enter into a dialogue in which the boundaries of 'native' and 'foreign' are examined, shifted and put at risk. Such forms of intersubjective communication, in which one engages with what is supposedly foreign or rejected, are of course risky since they set clear boundaries in motion, render judgements that have been made invalid and require reorientation (Lenz, 2021).

From this fundamentally intersubjective orientation towards the acquisition and cultivation of tolerance of ambiguity, religious education can be understood in a broad as well as deep theological sense as a contribution to democracy when aspects of human dignity and the recognition of the other, equality regardless of gender, origin, race or religion are raised. However a decidedly ambiguity-promoting and theological approach

is helpful, in order to make the distinction from citizenship education possible, on the one hand, and to avoid being narrowed down to pure value education, on the other.

At the same time, a professional-theoretical aspect is also of essential importance for religious education relevant to democracy: teachers are faced with the responsibility of reflecting on their own attitude to aspects of democracy and the political arena. This requires a specific ethos from which teachers ask themselves when planning and dealing with each topic to what extent it is or can become relevant to democracy. Those responsible for religious education have to understand their teaching within the horizon of a tolerance of ambiguity not only as an essential contribution to general education, but also as an important component of democratic school culture and thus of a broader orientation towards the common good.

### **3.2 Didactic concretisations**

Compared to the programmatic reflections within the theory of religious education, didactic concretisations, especially for questions of dealing with populism, have so far been scarce (cf. for example a completely absent practical orientation of the corresponding WiReLex article by Kronenberg & Becker, 2020). In addition, due to the thematic topicality, both curriculum development and the creation of teaching and learning materials lag considerably behind the concrete democratically relevant processes. At least, substantial handouts on dealing with populism and right-wing extremism can be found on various church portals, which also focus on the educational dimension or the concrete thematic work in the area of religious education (cf. Sekretariat der DBK, 2019; exemplary for several Protestant regional churches ELKB, 2017).

The EKD initiative „Dein Glaube - Deine Demokratie“ (Your Faith - Your Democracy) (EKD, 2019) is an example of how such didactic concretisations can be imagined, for instance when it says: „Politics without religious education all too quickly confuses God and man and believes it has to save the 'world'. Therefore: stand up for our democracy, concretely, wisely, practically - trusting that the rest is God's business.“ (p. 2). The deliberately discursive, open and at the same time theologically founded character of such a commitment is also recognisable here in the conclusion: „Fight passionately for our democracy against everything that endangers it - but never against people.“ (p. 2).

Nevertheless, more intensive reflection on the didactic connection of biblical themes and motifs with the treatment of current theological questions is still pending for religious education. For example, it is necessary to consider more precisely with which claim to validity the thematisation of prophetic tradition can take place in life-serving forms - in all openness to the manifold ambiguities of prophetic tradition and God's speech of truth itself (cf. Schlag, 2017; in an exemplary way laid out in a religious education and explicitly theological perspective for the question of dealing with „Heimat“, racism,



exclusion and belonging, cf. Schlag, 2021).

Democracy and resistance to inhumane sentiments and practices mark the value and significance of a religiously influenced, ambiguity-tolerant educational culture. The dispute about what is right and appropriate is an essential part of democracy and cannot be silenced by the blinding of factual ambiguities or reference to supposed unambiguities. For religious education, being sensitive for plurality and difference in the face of current threats to democracy, a personality-oriented, as well as a clear theological and ethical profile is a promising contribution for strengthening democracy in the public realm.

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