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# Navigating Controversial Issues in German Denominational RE: Discussing Challenges and Opportunities in an Era of Growing Super-Diversity

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the question of to what extent denominational RE is able to deal with controversial issues (CIs), particularly in the context of a super-diverse society. Focusing on German Catholic RE as a case study, it examines the common assumption that denominational RE has structural disadvantages compared to integrative RE models, such as a limited diversity of perspectives due to its alignment with a specific religious community. The analysis highlights both the challenges and potential strengths of denominational RE in regard to teaching CIs. Empirical findings suggest that denominational RE can foster religious maturity and democratic values when teachers implement didactic standards. However, challenges such as the risk of indoctrination and the avoidance of CIs remain significant. The discussion concludes that the quality of teaching CIs depends heavily on contextual and pedagogical factors, so that denominational RE can also enable high-quality teaching of CIs.

**Keywords**: Super-diversity, controversial issues, RE teachers, German RE, denominational RE

**Zusammenfassung:** Der Beitrag geht der Frage nach, inwieweit der konfessionelle Religionsunterricht in der Lage ist, sich mit kontroversen Themen (CIs) auseinanderzusetzen, insbesondere im Kontext einer superdiversen Gesellschaft. Am Beispiel des katholischen Religionsunterrichts in Deutschland wird die gängige Annahme untersucht, dass der konfessionelle Religionsunterricht im Vergleich zu integrativen Modellen von Religionsunterricht strukturelle Nachteile hat, wie z.B. eine eingeschränkte Perspektivenvielfalt aufgrund der Ausrichtung auf eine bestimmte Religionsgemeinschaft. Die Analyse zeigt sowohl die Herausforderungen als auch die potenziellen Stärken des konfessionellen Religionsunterrichts im Hinblick auf die Vermittlung von CIs auf. Die empirischen Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass konfessioneller Religionsunterricht religiöse Mündigkeit und demokratische Werte fördern kann, wenn die Lehrkräfte didaktische Standards umsetzen. Herausforderungen wie die Gefahr der Indoktrination und die Vermeidung von CIs sind jedoch nach wie vor signifikant. Die Diskussion kommt zu dem Schluss, dass die Qualität des Unterrichts stark von kontextuellen und pädagogischen Faktoren abhängt, so dass auch konfessioneller Religionsunterricht einen qualitativ hochwertigen Kontroversenunterricht ermöglichen kann.

**Schlagwörter:** Super-Diversität, kontroverse Themen, Religionslehrkräfte, deutscher Religionsunterricht, konfessioneller Religionsunterricht

## 1. Introduction

How can religious education (RE) appropriately respond to social changes associated with the pluralization, secularization, and deinstitutionalization of religion? This question is discussed and addressed in various ways across different European countries and German federal states. German RE is generally organized along denominational lines and anchored in constitutional law, with religious communities and the state collaborating on curricula and resources, enabling Catholic, Protestant and

increasingly also Islamic RE classes. In addition to this mainstream model, there are further models such as integrative RE (e. g. in the federal state of Brandenburg), which is independent of religious institutions, as well as confessional-cooperative or Christian RE, in which Catholic and Protestant denominations work together (Riegel, 2018).

The development towards a diverse landscape of RE in Germany can be understood as a response to an increasingly super-diverse society. The concept of super-diversity refers to the complexity and diversity within populations, particularly in urban contexts (Vertovec, 2007, pp. 1024–1054). It is based on the assumption that people who differ not only in terms of their origin or ethnicity, but also in terms of various social and cultural characteristics (such as education, migration status, language skills, religious orientation, length of residence and socio-economic factors), live and interact together. Educational institutions face the challenge of having to respond to the specific needs and circumstances of this super-diverse society's individuals due to the sharp increase in diversity ("super-diversity light"), particularly in younger population groups. Super-diversity and denominational RE in particular, therefore give rise to areas of tension, because super-diversity recognizes a high level of cultural, religious and social diversity, while denominational RE is often focused on one or a few specific religious orientations. This discrepancy is particularly evident in educational contexts in which students come from many different religious, linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

In light of this tension, one could advocate for shifting away from denominational RE towards more inclusive models that seem to be more appropriate for the diverse identity concepts of today's students and young people in Germany. However, attempts to initiate sustainable changes reveal distinct limits, particularly of a legal and organizational nature, as illustrated by the case of so-called *Christian* RE in Lower Saxony (Heinig, Hense, Lindner & Simojoki, 2024). Therefore, in this article, we aim to explore possibilities *within* the framework of denominational RE, focusing on German Catholic RE as a case study, to address the increasing super-diversity. To this end, we pose the following question: *To what extent is denominational RE able to deal with controversial issues (CIs) in a super-diverse society?* These can be understood as issues that lack distinct scientific or political solutions and are subject to public debate. Thus, CIs are "'real-life' issues" that "arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society" (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, pp. 7–8). Major religious questions (e. g., the question of theodicy) that are often addressed in RE can be seen as CIs (Büttner & Reis, 2020).

This question is meaningful in a super-diverse society, as new conflicts and controversies arise in such a society as a result of divergent world views, which are also part of school and teaching (El-Mafaalani, 2020; Lehner-Hartmann, Peter & Stockinger, 2022). In order for students to orientate themselves in such a society, they need the ability to deal with conflict. For example, empirical research shows that high-quality teaching on CIs can strengthen student's conflict competences, e. g. tolerance towards divergent positions and the ability to change perspectives (Herbst, 2023a).

To answer the question in this paper, we systematically examine the three aspects of the didactic triangle: teachers, topics/issues, and students. For each vertex of the triangle, we examine the specific features of denominational RE at this level as well as opportunities and challenges that are associated with them. In doing so, previous arguments are taken up (for basics: Herbst, 2023a; Herbst, 2025; Herbst & Herdramm, 2025), discussed and linked with new empirical findings and scientific insights (e. g. authoritarianism studies).

## 2. Challenges and opportunities regarding teaching CIs in denominational RE

### 2.1 Teachers

In denominational RE, teachers are formally of the same denomination as their subject, serving as key representatives of confessional identity in the eyes of the religious communities. They are expected to represent their denominational affiliation, bear witness to their faith and credibly stand up for their worldview position (e. g. Hiller & Münch-Wirtz, 2021, pp.134–139). From the Catholic Church's perspective, this includes the expression of the teachers' critical positions towards the Church itself (Mendl, 2013). Moreover, the Catholic Church has legitimized a plurality of interpretations and ways of life *within* the Christian faith for RE teachers (GBC, 2023). This acknowledges that RE teachers, in an increasingly super-diverse society, often have a complex, mosaic-like religious identity themselves. They often combine their faith in various ways with elements from popular culture or even other religions.

However, it is still normatively assumed that they agree with and uphold the essential tenets of Christianity, such as a belief in a personal God. In regard to the teaching of CIs, this condition is associated with two problems: The first problem, the risk of indoctrination, is obvious. The second one concerns empirical findings about RE teachers in particular which indicate that they tend to avoid addressing controversial issues in the classroom. Regarding the first problem, namely that this model poses a (subtle) form of indoctrination (e. g. Alberts, 2019), it can be pointed out that it is not attributed to the teachers' intentions, but rather to the didactic design of the subject RE (Petrik, 2022): If the teacher share their expertise, position or world view (e. g. through so-called "konfessorische Rede", which approximately means "disclosing one's own confession"), then they are at least indirectly and relatively bound to a certain world view. Other religious or ideological views are thus structurally disadvantaged. Students would be restricted in forming their own opinions, at least regarding key topics (in the Church's hierarchy of truths) on which the religious community has an unambiguous position.

This framing of the problem certainly highlights a serious threat for discussing CIs that should not be ignored because of its potential effects. For example, students may not dare to express a critical position towards the respective religious community, which would be highly detrimental to teaching CIs in RE. This fundamental threat, however, can be minimized by didactic standards that are in line with religious maturity: For example, the teacher should

- signal openness to dissent,
- establish a culture of debate in the classroom,
- make his/her decisions transparent,
- enable voluntary participation,
- guarantee spaces for critical exchange and reflection.

Meeting such standards is undoubtedly a challenging task, but studies on the objectification ("Versachkundlichung") of RE in the actual classroom show that it is quite realistic (Englert et al., 2014). Studies, such as those by Rudolf Englert and colleagues, reveal distinct challenges in addressing CIs in RE: Students, firstly, view major religious questions as private matters; secondly, they struggle to articulate their positions effectively; and thirdly, differing perspectives in classroom discussions often remain vague and undefined.

In relation to these challenges, RE teacher's denominational affiliation represents a positive flip side: They develop specific competencies for addressing (religious) CIs, such as personal and spiritual skills, which are acquired during their teacher training, organized in collaboration with the Church. In regard to *observational learning* (Albert Bandura), that Hans Mendl (2015) adapted in terms of biographical and

ethical learning in RE, it can be beneficial if denominational teachers provide a credible testimony about their own religious standpoint. Firstly, they can demonstrate how to take a stance on an apparently private issue in a controversial environment without being completely certain that their stand is the right one. They can show how to convey their point of view while leaving room for other perspectives and approaches. Moreover, they can demonstrate how to deal with questions and public criticism of one's own position. With regard to the second and third challenge, it is crucial that RE teachers, through their training's focus on one specific religion, attain a certain depth of understanding in this area. This depth enables them to better decipher students' statements about religion and enhance their ability to express themselves (addressing challenge 2). It also helps them to define these statements distinctively in discussions and to identify theological tensions and contradictions between them (addressing challenge 3). Both aspects are essential prerequisites for engaging in meaningful debates in RE (Englert et al., 2014; Reese Schnitker et al., 2022). Another advantage is that, in their role as denominational representatives, they can also be consciously addressed because they can argue from their denominational stance. Particularly, this concept offers an advantage because arbitrariness, relativism, and skepticism among students are seen as major issues nowadays in German school education – also in other subjects such as philosophy and citizenship education (Drerup, 2023, p. 278). There are at least some indications that these assumptions are empirically correct, even if further studies would be desirable and important:

- In their studies and training, RE teachers learn strategies regarding how to bring their own positionality appropriately into the classroom from the very beginning (e.g. critical self-reflection; transparent communication; relativizing their own position) (e.g. Gärtner, 2020, pp. 42–43.11; Herbst, 2022, pp.386–394). This professional approach may be an advantage over teachers who tend to moderate lessons in a neutral manner and therefore may have little sensitivity to the fact that true neutrality is almost impossible (e.g. Niemi & Niemi, 2007). This perception is shared by RE teachers that rarely believe RE could be truly neutral (Herbst, 2023b, p.15).

- Empirical studies show that it can be beneficial from a developmental psychological point of view if students are confronted with clearly positioned teachers – at least if they are allowed to contradict the teachers and a discursive atmosphere prevails in the classroom. Then teachers are role models in terms of positioning and students are encouraged not only to form their own judgment but also to defend it publicly (in the classroom) and to take responsibility for the consequences (e.g. criticism) (Balzter et al., 2014, p.187; Schröder, 2016, pp.302–304).

- Such a teacher's endorsement of a position can mitigate some "corruptions of reason", e.g. relativistic, pessimistic or dogmatic views among students (Yacek, 2018, pp.83–85). Furthermore, studies show that this approach can also reduce 'corruptions of discourse' that arise from strong group dynamics and social homogenization processes in the classroom (Englert & Eck, 2021, pp.156–158; Woppowa, 2022, pp.210–212). These problems are also being perceived in the integrative approaches of RE, but teachers are less able to take a clear (and motivating) position here (Meyer, 2012, p.134–141).

The second problem is that empirical findings indicate that RE teachers in particular seem to avoid addressing CIs in the classroom (overview of studies in: Herbst, 2023a). However, high-quality teaching of CIs requires teachers who do not shy away from such topics and approach them responsibly. Thus, for teaching CIs in RE, the denominational commitment and the high religiosity of RE teachers is a challenge. Therefore, it is of interest to consider more recent research findings that point to a more complex situation than assumed. Even if denominational RE teachers in Germany are particularly religious (Pirner, 2022, p.15), they are at the same time very open to teaching CIs: Overall, RE teachers stated in a survey that they were not willing to teach a particular CI in only 6.4 % of all cases. The willingness was particularly low for three CIs: the church abuse scandal (12 %), animal ethics (10.5 %)

and business ethics (10.3 %) (Herbst, 2023b, 14). These results are also consistent with the German findings of the current International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, according to which only a small minority of teachers believe that CIs should be avoided in the classroom (Hahn-Laudenberg & Abs, 2024, p.302). How can this be explained?

There are at least two possible explanations for the different empirical findings. Firstly, there could simply be a *mind-behavior gap*: In the survey, teachers signalize openness to CIs, but in everyday classroom practice, they could shy away from them due to practical restrictions. To investigate this issue in more detail, empirical research is needed that also examines the lessons of the teachers surveyed. This assumption is supported by RE teaching research that hints at RE teachers that rarely frame topics as open controversies (e.g. Englert & Eck, 2021; Reese Schnitker et al., 2022). Nazar (2020), for example, notes that on the one hand teachers are explicitly willing to deal with CIs in the classroom, but on the other hand they seem reluctant and uncertain: They do not know whether they are ready and prepared.

Also likely, but not yet proven, is a second explanation: In many studies, not only religiosity but also a 'conservative' political stance has been identified as an obstacle to teaching CIs (e.g. Gindi et al., 2021, pp.144–146). It can be assumed that there is a theoretical construct behind these observations that is more meaningful than religiosity: *authoritarianism* (or alternatively: SDO, Social dominance orientation). Studies show that authoritarianism fundamentally shapes the teacher's teaching style. For example, pluralism and multi-perspectivity are curtailed: Authoritarian teachers prefer a directive and controlling teaching style that leaves little room for spontaneous reactions or self-directed activities by students. They are also less likely to succeed in building harmonious teacher-student relationships and encouraging a democratic atmosphere with open exchange (overview of studies: Petzel, 2009, pp.179–182). Although authoritarianism correlates with religiosity and conservatism, it, at the same time, cannot be equated with them (Petzel, 2009, p.55). Rather, social psychologists assume that there is a non-dogmatic *form of religiosity* ("Religious Quest scale"), which is open to pluralism. In contrast to this, there is a *fundamentalist religiosity*, which goes hand in hand with a literal and unreflecting adoption of religious guidelines ("Religious Fundamentalism scale"), and tends towards authoritarianism (e.g. Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; overview: Petzel, 2009, p.55). The researchers suppose that these two types exist in relation to various religious communities, although there may be minor differences (Petzel, 2009, p.66). This results, which should be applied more strongly to the area of education (e.g. Barp & Dannemann, 2023), indicate that it may not be religiosity itself, but rather authoritarianism and a certain (dogmatic) form of religiosity that could hinder the teaching of CIs.

In addition to these two explanations, there are of course other possible explanations that cannot be discussed here. For example, it is likely that newcomers to the profession are much more reluctant to teach CIs than their experienced colleagues.

## 2.2 Topics / issues

In denominational RE, CIs are discussed regarding one particular worldview's perspective. However, that does not mean that other perspectives are excluded and plurality in the classroom is dismissed. Denominational RE also involves dealing with criticism of (this specific) religion and other worldviews (Chapter 2.3). In addition, a worldview in turn implies a diversity of ideological consequences – even if some are more plausible than others. This is emphasized by the fact that there are both politically 'conservative' and 'progressive' currents in the various religions, which are represented differently among teachers (Herbst, 2023b, pp.9–11).

In order to understand the specific potential of denominational RE in dealing with CIs, it is helpful to distinguish between different levels of controversy (e.g. Dearden, 1981, pp.38–39; Gronostay, 2019, pp. 35–38). The following three levels are accompanied by an increased degree of controversy:

1. *Empirical level* (fact-related): Cases exist where the evidence is currently too limited to reach a conclusion, though this may change with improved data. For instance, if the government enacts mortgage controls to curb rising house prices, it could be controversial whether this will be effective, as evidence exists both for and against this approach (Dearden, 1981, p.38).
2. *Ethical-normative level* (value-related) and *political-normative level* (interest-related): A case "where consideration-making criteria are agreed but the weight to be given to them is not. Thus, all will agree that in considering whether the Vale of Belvoir should have its underground coal resources exploited both environmental and economic criteria are relevant. But presumably local residents and the National Coal Board weight these consideration-making criteria rather differently. The matter is controversial, and probably more intractably so than in the first type of case." (Dearden, 1981, p.39)
3. *Fundamental level* (worldview-related). This level is about fundamental controversies at the level of worldviews, Gronostay (2019, p.37) therefore also speaks of an "ideological level". Here, "whole frameworks of understanding are different. [...]. To take an educational case, consider the differences of possible approach[es] that might be adopted towards pupil behaviour that is perceived as undesirable. Should we look at it most appropriately as in need of re-shaping by the techniques of behaviour modification; or as in need of investigation in terms of psycho-analytic causes; or as in need of interpreting along the lines of a Marxist social analysis making reference to alienation and class domination; or more simply as expressive of an unsuitable choice of curricular material or staff attitudes [...]? The matter is controversial." (Dearden, 1981, p.39) Fundamental CIs are issues where dissent cannot be resolved using methods of falsification. A rational discourse between the parties involved no longer seems possible (Gronostay, 2019, pp.37–38).

Due to the predominant, but not exclusive perspective of the denomination that is cast on the CIs, it can be concluded that (normative) controversy entails several challenges in denominational RE (Chapter 2.1). It is at least beneficial that the internal plurality within a specific religious tradition is considered in RE. Moreover, it does not confine itself solely to these perspectives. But nevertheless, it prioritizes a specific worldview. Integrative RE, for example, is more similar to political and civic education, as CIs are framed as value dissent (Meyer, 2012, pp.133–142). However, the situation is different on the last level: One can assume that controversy on a *fundamental level* is promoted in a certain way by the specific organization of denominational RE. Even if there is still a lack of empirical support for this thesis (Herbst, 2022, p.514), there are some compelling reasons for it.

Denominational RE in Germany refers to CIs on the fundamental level in a pedagogical and curricular sense. In terms of educational theory by Dietrich Benner or Jürgen Baumert, RE concerns "constitutive rationality" (e.g. Klutz, 2016, pp.32–34). It is no coincidence that the examples of CIs at this level often have to do with religion. Dearden (1981, p.39) states: "A final example of this fourth type of controversy would be the controversy between the religious believer and non-believer over the correct description of a great many things in the world." In addition, Gronostay (2019, p.37) provides another example in regard to this level: "A rational discourse between supporters of the free and democratic basic order [*freiheitlich demokratische Grundordnung* in Germany] and religious fanatics is hardly possible, if at all."

Regarding this level, denominational RE offers some advantages: The in-depth discussion of a particular worldview enables this specific form of controversy. Positions within common sense are not discussed, but the common sense itself and its anthropological, historical-philosophical and social-ontological assumptions are critically reflected and questioned (e.g. Englert, 2015). Although it is not always obvious what exactly common sense is (e.g. Herbst, 2022, pp.303–320), a critical examination of hegemonic views is clearly necessary to develop one's own judgment and to reflect on CIs at this fundamental level. This matter can be illustrated with a paradigmatic example from the field of RE: Religious educators in England (e.g. Hull, 1997; for a critical overview: Attfield, 2008) and Germany

(e.g. Gottwald & Rickers, 2002; for an updating overview: Heller, 2019) focus on the influence that *consumerism* and *money culture* have on students' thinking and attitudes. Capitalist ideologies – as these religious educators note in line with current pedagogical analyses (e.g. Drerup, 2023, p.266; Schinkel et al., 2010) – such as *popular materialism* or *radical competition* are transmitted through schooling while weakening students' independent judgment. RE enables critical engagement with such „autonomy-undermining structural constraints" („autonomieunterminierende Strukturvorgaben", Drerup, 2023, p.266), because the profound engagement with a centuries-old tradition of thought increases the ability to distance oneself from contemporary common sense positions. Thus, RE offers a counter-hegemonic perspective and enables critique of ideology (Englert, 2007, pp.299–301; Riegel, 2021, pp.44–46). While critique of ideology has great potential for RE, it has to be considered that, at the same time, religion(s) and thus also RE, are also prone to being ideological. Hence, it is important to reflect on how one's own religion or tradition is entangled in such ideological structures (Herbst, 2018, p.93; Chapter 2.3).

This is also evident in the fact that this problem has hardly been addressed in other disciplines (e.g. Drerup, 2023, p.266). Furthermore, Meyer (2012, pp.133–142), who compares RE in Germany and the UK, notes that British RE does not challenge the status quo. He illustrates his perception with the fact that *critique of ideology* is handled differently in both contexts (e.g. Grimmit, 1987; Vierzig, 1975). Whereas in Germany, critique of (religious) ideologies (e.g. the Hare Krishna movement) can also be found in RE research and teaching materials, in the UK it is primarily critique of ideology as *individualistic self-criticism* that opens up a space for pluralism. Meyer (2012, p.138) also attributes this to the "multitude of interest groups" that help shape and determine RE in the UK: "Critique of social conditions would immediately call one of the interest groups into action" (for German integrative RE in Bremen and Brandenburg: cf. Kenngott, 2015). In contrast, Catholic RE in particular has a much more socio-critical tradition (e.g. the Resolution of the Würzburg Synod on RE, the paper "Justice in the World" of the World Synod of Catholic Bishops). This enables depth of content instead of pluralistic breadth and thus a discussion of CIs on a fundamental level in RE (in terms of religion as a medium of "world-distantiation"; Klutz, 2016, p.35). In the UK, on the contrary, there is more of a danger of reducing RE to civil religion, functionalizing it for civic education and only aiming to educate good citizens (e.g. Gearon, 2015; Meyer, 2012, p.135).

The considerations above demonstrate that fundamental CIs can be dealt with particularly well in denominational RE, at least when certain educational and epistemological assumptions are shared – such as the idea that specialization is what truly paves the way to general education, and that a universal perspective can only be achieved by engaging with a specific religion or worldview (e.g. Benner, 2015, pp.190–197). That does not mean that other subjects do not deal with this type of CIs at all; rather, this is not an absolute statement but expresses a *clear tendency*. It also doesn't imply that only this type of CIs is or should be dealt with in denominational RE. Rather, other types of CIs are also included at various points:

- *Empirical level*: Natural science and social science knowledge, for example on the theory of evolution, man-made climate change or secularization.
- *Normative level*: Social science and humanities knowledge, for example on moral issues such as dilemma situations or social issues such as "war and peace".

## 2.3 Students

Empirical studies show that the ideological diversity in denominational RE in a super-diverse society is greater than what one might expect considering the organizational design of denominational RE (overview of RE studies on youth religiosity: Kropač, 2022; See Chapter 2.1 for students' perception of religion as a private matter and their struggle to talk about religious CIs). Recent studies highlight the religious diversity of students in denominational RE, for which there has been an awareness in RE

research since the turn of the millennium. For example, Ziebertz et al. (2008) have established an empirically based classification of five types of religiosity that can be found in denominational RE: There are Christian-church (approx. 15 %), Christian-oriented (approx. 25 %), religiously unaffiliated (approx. 20 %), functionally religious (approx. 20 %) and non-religious young people (approx. 20 %) (data according to: Gärtner, 2015, p.23). The actual distribution certainly depends on the local context (there are major differences between urban and rural regions and between federal states in Germany). Due to increasing super-diversity since the 2000s, the numbers for Christian-church and Christian-oriented young people have likely decreased further. Furthermore, many young people participate in denominational RE who no longer believe in God despite their connection to the church and/or Christianity (Kropač, 2022, Chapter 2.1.1). In terms of political attitudes, there is probably a greater plurality here than assumed, too. For example, Christian-church and Christian-oriented young people can be assigned to different social milieus like the socio-ecological and the traditional bourgeois milieu (e.g. Calmbach et al., 2020). This indicates that "ideological diversity" (Gronostay, 2019, p.86) is also present in denominational RE, although its concrete manifestation depends on other factors, for example the school context. At the same time, it is evident that ideological diversity in denominational RE is less pronounced than in other subjects. This is because, in addition to the content framework being denominational, the majority of students, at least formally, belong to a specific denomination. This influences the context in which discussions occur. Some researchers argue that in order to facilitate the discussion of CIs, it is crucial to have the widest possible range of ideological diversity within groups (e.g. Beck, 2013). An exemplary reason for this is that homogeneous learning groups tend to strive for agreement, which hinders the discussion of CIs ("concurrence-seeking"; Gronostay, 2019, p.89). Here, non-denominational RE may have advantages because it facilitates heterogeneous learning environments which may seem more suitable for a super-diverse society.

However, one objection can be raised to this potential criticism: *Relatively* greater homogeneity should not only be seen as a disadvantage, but also as an advantage for discussing CIs: A relatively homogeneous class has the advantage that CIs can be taught in a "religious safe space." The concept of safe spaces, used among others in postcolonial theory (e.g. Bhabha, 2004, pp.50–52), is increasingly found in RE research (e.g. Stockinger, 2016). "RE as a safe space" means that students are respected as individuals and protected from discrimination ("dignity safety"). It does not entail that the students are "intellectually safe" from challenging and controversial views (for this distinction: Callan, 2016). At a time when religion is an important reference point for discrimination practices (e.g. Pickel et al., 2020, pp.105–108), religious students are at some risk of being humiliated. For example, religious educator Joachim Willems (2018) interviewed young people about their ideas of religion in the research project REVIER and proved that criticism of religion today often conveys prejudice and resentment, especially toward Islam. Thus, criticism of religion can become a means of the exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities. Empirical classroom research also shows that teaching CIs carries the risk of discrimination and hurting religious feelings because other students speak their minds or vehemently defend their positions (e.g. Flensner & von der Lippe, 2019, pp.6–7). Therefore, the heterogeneous "brave spaces" in integrative RE can lead to intense and sometimes painful experiences for vulnerable people (on this and further criticism of 'brave spaces': Hameister, 2023, pp.22–23; for further challenges and opportunities regarding teaching CIs in an integrative RE: see Easton et al., 2019, Chapter 2). Of course, it is also possible to arrange integrative RE as a "safe(r) space" (e.g. Jackson, 2014, p.47). Certain rules of conduct and conversation can strengthen a trusting climate in the classroom – as in any school subject. However, precisely because denominational RE is religiously (relatively) homogeneous, it offers the opportunity to systematically structure the classroom as a safe(r) space. In public schools, where religious people face many challenges (e.g. Lehner-Hartmann et al., 2022; for international perspectives: Fraser-Pearce & Fraser, 2023), denominational RE provides a retreat, a refuge of two hours per week. Teachers and students share a space of common experiences and the (possible) exposure to religious discrimination,

which facilitates them to take each other's perspective. Furthermore, RE teachers have (often) learned to deal sensitively with a particular religion (Weiße, 2011, pp.120–123) and to grasp this religion as a subject matter, at least to some extent, in its depth and richness. Under favorable conditions (Callan, 2016, p.65; Roose, 2022, pp.68–70), this can even promote teaching about religious CIs because it makes stereotypical and simplistic views about (the specific) religion more difficult. For example, in denominational RE, religious problems can not only be addressed openly – without much danger of religious discrimination –, but also appropriately: Internal criticism (of religion) is not, like external criticism, in danger of being paternalistic and missing the point (e.g. Walzer, 1987). The self-criticism of their own religious tradition carried out by denominational RE teachers can have democratizing and civilizing effects, which external criticism hardly allows.

This objection also addresses the problem of "othering": It is seen as problematic that the *institutional division* of students according to their religiosity in denominational RE reinforces religious divisions and perpetuates religious prejudices. This poses a particular problem in relation to the explosive nature of religious CIs (Herbst, 2023a, pp.16–17): Religion is frequently used in order to form "us" and "them" groups, and the students' sense of identity therefore is affected (e.g. Freuding, 2022; Lindström & Sullivan, 2021, p.70; Willems, 2020). However, this problem needs to be relativized in two ways: On the one hand, expertise and depth of content are offered in regard to one religion in denominational RE, as explained above. A profound and self-critical examination of one religion in denominational RE can sharpen awareness of the internal plurality of this religion, its diversity and inner dynamic, and thus counteract the juxtaposition of religions as 'monolithic blocks'. In this way, othering can be prevented, and an awareness of plurality is promoted (e.g. Achour, 2014). On the other hand, othering also exists in other subjects and in integrative RE. As analyses of RE books and materials indicate, the problems are not (only) at the level of organizational forms, but also at the level of didactic concepts and methodological approaches (e.g. Alberts et al., 2023, p.155, pp.319–320; Henningsen, 2022; Winkler & Scholz, 2021). These studies show which *methodical* approaches can be used to counteract othering in denominational RE (Henningsen, 2022, pp.283–297): In order to adequately represent religious communities, it is necessary to present the heterogeneity and dynamics of the groups, avoid dichotomies, promote a diversity of perspectives, allow voids, vary media and provide additional information.

## 3. Conclusion and Future Orientations

In social sciences and migration research, the term super-diversity is increasingly being used to describe the growing ethnic diversity (super-diversity light) and the associated increase in the complexity of identities and social contexts. Such current social developments could be an argument in favor of an integrative model of RE in Germany because it suits this diversity. In contrast, denominational RE appears as if the anachronistic distinction of denominationalism is being applied to this diversity, although social lines of distinction now run across the denominations (e.g. cosmopolitanism vs. communitarianism). In the article, this complex debate was condensed into one question: To what extent is denominational RE able to deal with controversial issues (CIs) in a super-diverse society? One of the reasons why this question was raised is that conflict competence is increasingly expected of students in a super-diverse society. If denominational RE allows for the productive discussion of controversies, it would offer an opportunity to address social transformations *within* the current organizational framework.

The starting point for the reflections was that denominational RE presumably has a structural disadvantage in regard to the discussion of CIs: It seems to undermine a true diversity of perspectives and the perspective taken in the classroom is primarily bound to a particular religious community. Using the example of denominational RE in Germany, however, this assumption was relativized and

the complexity of the issue was emphasized. On the one hand, some challenges with regard to this organizational form of RE were highlighted. On the other hand, it was pointed out that there are some advantages and opportunities of denominational RE with regard to teaching CIs, which should not be overlooked. Three advantages should be highlighted in particular: the *role model* function of RE teachers in taking a critical position in the classroom (Chapter 2.1), the discussion of *fundamental* CIs (Chapter 2.2) and a differentiated reflection of religion in a *safe space* that also allows criticism of religion in a polarized society (Chapter 2.3). In this context, the empirical findings tend to point to the following matter: Enabling high-quality teaching of CIs depends on specific contextual factors (e.g. methods and teacher training) that affect different forms of RE. However, whether this is the case needs to be proven in the future, for which comprehensive large-scale studies such as the one by Hess & McAvoy (2015) or Pace (2021) remain the benchmark.

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