

## Controversiality?! Structural Problems and Didactic Design Options in RE

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the concept of Controversiality has been the subject of much discussion in various didactic discourses. This statement can undoubtedly also be applied to religious education, although the study of this topic has so far been rather selective and not very systematic. The article provides an insight into the current discussion in religious education. The focus is on current distinctions, didactic strategies and empirical research results. On this basis, analytical starting points for understanding the lack of controversy in religious education as well as further perspectives for overcoming this lack are discussed.

**Keywords:** controversiality, religious education, empirical educational research, plurality.

**Zusammenfassung:** In den vergangenen Jahren wurde in unterschiedlichen fachdidaktischen Diskursen mit großem Engagement über den Begriff der Kontroversität nachgedacht. Diese Aussage lässt sich zweifelsfrei auch auf die Religionspädagogik übertragen, wobei die Beschäftigung mit diesem Thema bislang noch eher punktuell und wenig systematisch erfolgt. Der Artikel gibt einen Einblick in die aktuelle religionspädagogische Diskussion. Der Fokus liegt dabei auf aktuellen Unterscheidungen, didaktischen Strategien und empirischen Forschungsergebnissen. Auf diesem Hintergrund werden sowohl analytische Ansatzpunkte zum Verständnis des Kontroversitätsmangels im Religionsunterricht als auch weiterführende Perspektiven zur Überwindung dieses Mangels diskutiert.

**Schlagwörter:** Kontroversität, Religionsunterricht, empirische Unterrichtsforschung, Pluralität.

The concept of controversiality has been the subject of considerable reflection in various didactic discourses in recent years (Drerup, 2021). Religious education is an undeniable part of this process (Herbst, 2023a). Despite the growing interest in controversiality in the literature on religious education, it is evident that it has thus far been addressed in a rather selective and non-systematic manner. The result is an overall picture of diverse individual findings and reflections in which the conceptual connection is only alluded to. The lack of synthesis among individual approaches is a result of the considerable effort being dedicated to examining similar concepts. For example, the thematic issues of 'ambiguity' (Rothgangel & Pirner, 2022), 'positionality' (Schwarz, Meyer & Rothgangel, 2022) and 'critical thinking' (Tuna, Juen & Juen, 2024) have been explored in religious education journals.

The growing confusion surrounding the multitude of similar terms and concepts mirrors the challenge of addressing the concept of controversiality in a clear and consistent manner, even when pedagogical or empirical work is conducted on the subject. As Herbst (2024) notes, the concept is often associated with a lack of clarity regarding its content and normative aspects. In light of these considerations, it is

challenging to provide a comprehensive answer to the question of what defines the current state of discourse on controversiality, beyond the various individual conceptual aspects. One runs the risk of summarizing what is perhaps rather divergent. In what follows, therefore, I will limit myself to highlighting some tendencies in the way controversy is dealt with in RE. The conspicuous features that I would like to highlight here are primarily of a pedagogical and learning theoretical nature and relate primarily to denominational religious education within German-speaking countries.

## **I. Dimensions of controversy relevant to religious education**

In the following, I will focus on the question of why and in what form controversy is a topic in religious education at all. In particular, two dimensions will be considered: a factual and a personal understanding of controversy (cf. Woppowa, 2018, pp. 188–189).

### **I.1 The factual dimension**

The factual dimension of the debate in religious education is predicated upon a number of thematic controversies. The current global context, which has been described as a "polycrisis" (Tooze, 2022), undoubtedly has a significant impact on this factual component. In light of the multitude of global challenges facing society, including the climate crisis, the coronavirus pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and the social polarization that has resulted, it is evident that no question can be answered without generating new questions and alternative answers. The polycrisis is undoubtedly a driving force behind the revival of a new sensitivity for the political dimension in religious education (Grümme, 2023; Herbst, 2022). Accordingly, the understanding of factual controversy is primarily related to the much-quoted controversy requirement of the Beutelsbach Consensus of 1976, which is particularly common in political education and which is critically taken up and productively expanded by religious education scholars for the inherent logic of religious education (Herbst, Gärtner & Kläsener, 2023; Herbst, 2023b; Herbst, 2021; Hiller & Münch-Wirtz, 2021).

In light of the long-standing neglect of a critical tradition of religious education within the context of religious education discourse, the impact of political controversies on religious education cannot be overstated. However, the issues raised by the polycrisis mean that other aspects of the controversy are less prominent in the discourse. Jan-Hendrik Herbst, currently probably the most insistent proponent of negotiating political controversies in religious education, has himself repeatedly pointed out that the normative foundations of denominational religious education concern a whole range of controversies that are "related to political education, but not necessarily limited to it" (Herbst, 2023c, p. 13). Regardless of whether religious education also deals with theological or ethical controversies in addition to (church) political issues, the learning process always starts from controversial topics.

### **I.2 The personal dimension**

It is important to distinguish between the debates in religious education about factual controversiality and the more fundamental theoretical considerations about controversiality in dealing with religious plurality that have been established in religious education discourse for some time. This is a controversiality that reflects religious and denominational pluralization and thus also non-denominational or secular world views of students. The question of the connection between religious education and controversial learning is therefore posed here against the horizon of the students' different interpretations of meaning and the world (Könemann, 2011, pp. 71–76). In religious education, this personal orientation of controversiality has the task of dealing with the different world views of the students on the one hand and the different religious traditions as interpretations of their own way of life on the other hand on a more or less equal footing and to relate them to each other in a controversial way (Englert, 2002). In short, the personal dimension of controversiality, in which the differences

between religious and non-religious worldviews are disputed, follow a different logic than factual controversiality, because they are not only about the judgement of facts, but much more fundamentally about a controversial debate about different perspectives on the interpretation of the world.

## **2. Religious education strategies for dealing with controversy**

The distinction between factual (political-social, ethical and theological) controversiality and personal controversiality is not entirely clear-cut, since religious or political issues contribute to socially relevant and action-oriented judgements, attitudes, values and thus to the religious (identity) formation of the individual, and vice versa. The question is, however, whether these two levels are so far apart that they can be addressed with different didactic tools. In any case, there is a whole range of didactic approaches that deal with controversiality on the different dimensions. I would like to mention three approaches as examples:

### **2.1 The religious educational 'Lehrstückdidaktik'**

The religious educational 'Lehrstückdidaktik' developed by Rudolf Englert places particular emphasis on the modelling of controversial teaching arrangements (Englert, 2013a, pp. 80–82), which distinguishes it from general didactics, which tend to be conflict-free (Eck, 2022, pp. 66–67). For example, the dramaturgy of the 'Lehrstücke' developed in Essen is strongly oriented towards the content requirements of the respective controversy (Englert & Eck, 2021, p. 223–224; Schwarz, 2024, p. 166–167). Accordingly, a teaching piece begins with the triggering of clearly focused controversial questions. In creating such a controversy, the didactics of religious education makes use of the arsenal of striking dilemmas and pithy oppositions that have been accumulated over centuries of theological and religious-philosophical reflection. This should make it clear that the history of theology shows that even within one and the same religious community there are very different views on a question that didactics attempts to restage controversially in the classroom. Such controversies can be a productive stimulus for students' own theologizing, by carefully weighing up the argumentative suitability and practical consequences of opposing concepts. Reflecting on controversial interpretations and viewpoints should therefore provide an impetus for developing one's own religious argumentation and positioning skills.

### **2.2 The didactics of interweaving perspectives**

The didactics of 'perspective entanglement', largely developed by Jan Woppowa (2017), is an essential didactic strategy for religion in connection with efforts to achieve controversial learning. The approach interweaves professional and personal controversy and is therefore of great interest for controversial learning. While perspectives at the level of the subject matter emerge through the discussion of religious or denominational characteristics, they become relevant at the personal level, where students' subjective patterns of interpretation are intertwined with each other and with the objective perspectives of religious traditions and denominations as well as non-religious interpretations of reality. In this way, controversial learning is guaranteed in religious education, both on the part of the learning objects and on the part of the students and teachers. This means that it is not just a matter of discussing controversial issues. Rather, the objective perspective and personal patterns of interpretation are given equal status in the learning process in the sense of a mutual exploration: For "where students' subjective patterns of interpretation are intertwined both with each other and with the objective perspectives of religious traditions and denominations, as well as with nonreligious or other-religious interpretations of reality [...], controversy can arise on several levels" (Woppowa, 2017, p. 188). In the optimal scenario, students are encouraged to cultivate their own perspective on religious matters by integrating diverse viewpoints (denominational, non-denominational, cultural-historical, or biographical, among others) into a

personal framework. This is achieved by engaging with a specific contentious issue from an individual standpoint.

### 2.3 Theological modelling

The constructivist concept of theological modelling originally developed by Oliver Reis (2012) is also concerned with a multi-perspectival presentation of the subject matter, but in a highly systematized form that structures the comparison of perspectives according to certain criteria. Different views on a theological topic are understood not simply as 'perspectives', but as theological models that are consistently constructed and answer certain key questions in different ways. Each model develops its own logical structure and understanding of reality.

This modelling not only opens the view to the multi-perspectivity of theological topics, but also offers religious education teachers an orientation for controversial learning. Together with Gerhard Büttner, Reis (2020) has used the concept of modelling to identify the dominant lines of discourse in religious education from the perspective of students, teachers and content, so that these can be taken up and productively incorporated into religious education in the sense of controversial learning. By orienting these models, which are developed on specific topics, along so-called lines of difference, which are guiding for the respective model of thought, it is first didactically necessary to know exactly which position is dominant among the students, in order to didactically place this normal perspective "from the knowledge of obscured traditions" (Büttner & Reis, 2020, p. 269) as a counterpoint, which could fuel the personal dimension of controversy.

### 3. Teaching characteristics that make controversial learning in RE difficult

The exemplary overview of subject-specific didactic approaches that promote factual and/or personal controversy in religious education could easily be supplemented by other religious didactic possibilities, such as theological argumentation (Weiß, 2022) or the use of conceptual change (Fuchs, 2010, pp. 183–203). However, we still know very little about the effectiveness of controversial approaches in religious education. This gap is regrettable insofar as empirical knowledge about how teachers deal with controversies can help to (further) develop appropriate didactics and pedagogy in relation to controversiality (Anker & von der Lippe, 2018). In light of these considerations, there is a clear need for empirical research in this area. Indeed, research on religious education tends to analyze controversial learning rather haphazardly, as it tends to focus on a variety of components of religious education, of which controversial forms are often only one aspect. So far, there are only fragmentary insights into what controversial learning actually takes place in religious education. In contrast to some teachers' self-assessments (Herbst, 2023c, pp. 13–14), these tend to be sobering.

#### 3.1 Difficulties in dealing with controversy

In the international debate on controversy (as an overview Herbst, 2023d, pp. 154–156; Drerup, 2021 pp. 28–34), Diana Hess (2004) was the first to highlight the challenge that teachers tend to avoid controversy. Current classroom observations also reveal different strategies for how and why teachers avoid controversial learning (Goll, 2024, pp. 7–9; Drerup, 2021, pp. 99–104). Some of these will be problematized in the following as examples of religious education (other aspects in Meyer, 2019, pp. 22–23).

*There is a lack of specialist expertise that promotes controversial learning:* As part of their conversation research, the Kassel research group looked, among other things, at the extent to which the RE lessons analyzed here enable students to engage in a positional debate with controversial assessments. And the result is clear: in 83% of the class discussions, students had little or no opportunity to contribute

controversial assessments. In just under a fifth (17%), the introduction of divergent views was observed to a high or very high degree (Reese-Schnitker, Bertram, Fröhle & Franzmann, 2020, pp. 280–281).

According to the research group, the fact that "a controversial debate on the topic is largely absent" (Reese-Schnitker, Bertram & Fröhle, 2020a, p. 509) is due to the fact that the discussions that do take place are of limited technical quality. On the positive side: Controversial learning was observed precisely in those conversations that were characterized by an "unmistakable theological content" on the one hand and by a teacher who was able to "give subject-specific impulses or keep the conversation on track" (Reese-Schnitker, Bertram & Fröhle, 2020a, p. 509) so that the students themselves were able to express their own, even controversial views (Reese-Schnitker, Bertram & Fröhle, 2020b, p. 325). Other empirical observations point in a similar direction, agreeing that a teacher who acts as a director opens up more controversial and dialogical perspectives on the part of the students than a teacher who remains in the role of a moderator (Englert & Eck, 2021, pp. 20–21). This means that the controversy that may exist in a learning group is usually 'moderated' in the direction of peaceful, divergent coexistence, so that controversies that could potentially be enlightening are largely avoided. This also means that it is not only the students who are encouraged by the teachers to 'show their colors' in RE, but that the teachers are also prepared to share some of their own ideas in the sense of symmetrical communication. Where the teacher not only moderates but also 'confesses' on request, the students are also more likely to open up. Positional indifference on the part of teachers therefore does not appear to be helpful for controversial learning (Herbst, 2021, pp. 91–92).

*Controversial perspectives are too rarely brought together in dialogue:* Ulrich Riegel and Mirjam Zimmermann's evaluation of interdenominational religious education in North Rhine-Westphalia points out that there is hardly any discussion of confessional questions of truth: "A respectful dialogue in which the positions and claims of the participating denominations are wrestled with hardly seems to exist in kokoRU" (Riegel & Zimmermann, 2022, p. 281). According to Eva-Maria Leven, this 'dialogue deficit' is due to the teachers' undifferentiated feedback on students' answers. Accordingly, a controversial debate about truth claims cannot take place at all because "teachers leave the students' statements as they are, i. e. they do not problematize their content or put them in relation to each other" (Leven, 2019, p. 349).

What seems to be lacking in the controversial dynamization of the learning process is an examination of the potentially very different individual perspectives on a controversy. A number of research studies emphasize that religious education classes largely refrain from discussing student's positions with each other (e. g. Stinglhammer, 2017, p. 322). This absence is of particular interest for controversial learning, because it is precisely in dialogue-based, reflective work on the differences in perception and interpretation that exist between students that religious or political judgement could be developed. Making the differences between these adaptations the subject of dialogue not only increases the amount of controversy, but also the amount of cognitive activation.

*Teaching is too often positive and factual:* The Essen study on the inner workings of religious education also finds a lack of controversial debates (Englert, Hennecke & Kämmerling, 2014, pp. 177–183). The evaluation of 113 video-recorded and analyzed RE lessons revealed that initiating intellectually challenging forms of controversial discussion that are perceived by students as further-reaching is only rarely possible. The research group attributes this finding primarily to the fact that the teachers in their sample tend to focus on religion primarily in a factual way (Englert, 2013b, pp. 257–261). In such an approach, for example, information about ideological differences is provided at best, with potential controversies being significantly defused or ignored altogether.

This finding is consistent with the results of several studies in Siegen. A study of a total of 116 lessons conducted by Ulrich Riegel together with Sarah Delling shows that the lessons are almost uniformly mono-perspective: "The dominant type in our sample [...] can be regarded as mono-religious in the sense that it addresses one particular religious worldview exclusively." (Riegel & Delling, 2019, p. 412). This means that even the first stage of teaching aimed at controversy is not found here: the multi-perspective presentation of learning objects.

Studies carried out in Germany and Austria on the subject of Islamic religious education also show that, as a result of affirmative teaching practice, there is a widespread lack of reflective handling of both factual controversies and personal convictions (as an overview Tuna, 2021, pp. 50–51). For example, Ulrich Krainz, who has analyzed teaching practice in Catholic and Islamic religious education in Vienna and Lower Austria, states that Muslim teachers "predominantly orientate their religious education towards the prescribed laws of the religion, the rules, norms and rites". Accordingly, they are concerned with "a communalizing and homogenizing way of thinking", so that "criticism or questioning [...] is not envisaged" (Krainz, 2014, p. 232). Such affirmative religious education prevents controversial learning as well as a restriction to factual information.

### 3.2 Mishandling of the controversy by the students

The didactic implementation of controversial learning seems to be accompanied by some difficulties. Not all the weaknesses are related to the competence of the teachers. Rather, it is obvious that religious education in the area of controversy is confronted with difficult questions that are essentially also related to the largely unconscious and unintentional behavior of the students. In what follows, therefore, we shall concentrate on those reactions of students in religious education which allow conclusions to be drawn about the way in which they receive controversy. Some of these anomalies will be discussed briefly.

*Students tend to take subjectivist positions:* Johannes Kubik writes: "Probably every RE teacher, but certainly every RE teacher who has ever taught in the upper school, knows the situation: In certain teaching situations, in which the students are supposed to show their colors, to be able to express and explain their own judgement, they fall back on the formula: 'Everyone has to decide for themselves.'" (Kubik, 2018, p. 56). Indeed, empirical classroom research often identifies the tendency in religious education for students to treat religious controversies as a matter of individual preference and personal attitude. For example, the RADEV study by the Essen Religious Education Research Group observes that a kind of class consensus often emerges when dealing with religious controversies, with students retreating to the position that controversial issues must be decided by each individual in the exercise of his or her own freedom and personal responsibility. However, if every position is relegated to the realm of the personal, the need for argumentative justification becomes largely superfluous. For where everything can be justified in some way, there is no factual or normative precedence of positions and arguments. If controversy is conceived in such an individualized way, then any attempt to establish criteria of validity that go beyond the subjectively assessed degree of success of individual adaptation strategies must fail from the outset. However, if there are no criteria for making an appropriate choice among alternatives, then everything is equal and therefore of equal value. In the worst case, controversially organized religious education does not lead to students being able to make religious judgements, but rather, if we follow Johannes Drerup, to a "delimited relativism" (Drerup, 2021, pp. 100–101).

*Students tend to reduce otherness:* Controversial learning presupposes the constructive endeavor to gain something at least worth considering for one's own judgement from what is foreign or new. What is meant here is a didactically demanding form of engagement with 'foreign' perspectives that also challenges students to question their own ideas and positions. In religious education, however, there is

a tendency to adapt perspectives that go beyond one's own views or even contradict them in such a way that the excess perspective is overlooked or denied (Eck & Englert, 2021, p. 83). This does not produce the expected differences and controversies, but rather an astonishing unanimity. Against this background, the controversial nature of issues does not necessarily open up the debate, but can also close it down, at least for the time being, and the controversy is initially much less tense than expected. This tendency may also be related to the fact that students do not perceive the controversies as 'real' (Meyer, 2019, pp. 19–20). This shows that previously planned controversial discussions can also fail if the problem identified by the teacher is more of a 'fake controversy' from the students' point of view (Fröhle & Reese-Schnitker, 2020, p. 423).

*Students tend to positionally homogenize:* The extent to which students are prepared to position themselves as required by personal and factual controversies has a lot to do with the level of trust in the classroom. For example, whether or not positions that are not considered likely to win a majority are articulated at all depends heavily on the atmosphere in the learning group. Empirical studies suggest that in the absence of a minority-friendly group dynamic, the positional differences that significantly fuel controversy in the learning group are not visible, or only insufficiently visible, because the students hold them back. Barbara Asbrand (2000, pp. 181–191), for example, has already shown that students who do not belong to the denomination that organizes religious education often do not really dare to bring their own ideological position into religious education discussions. This means that students' views on a controversial issue, which appear to be largely uniform on the surface level of the lesson, are often much more diverse than they initially appear. As a result of homogenization effects, however caused, it can happen that taking a position contrary to the dominant perspective does not seem appropriate to the students – and then diversity of opinion, controversy and discursive deepening quickly come to an end (Englert & Eck, 2021, p. 207).

#### **4. Ambivalences in the development of controversial debate**

Although the structural challenges to dealing with controversial issues in RE discussed here are neither representative nor exhaustive, we are now at a point where we can show very clearly the problems facing RE didactics in the area of controversial learning. In the light of the above, it may be helpful to consider some counterpoints that have received less attention in dealing with controversiality in religious education.

*Cognitive vs. emotional learning?* Much of what has been said about controversy has emphasised the cognitive dimension of religious learning. This overlooks the fact that non-cognitive factors also determine whether students are willing to engage in controversy. Emotional factors play an important role. Even the perception of relevance has a strong affective side. When emotions are involved, there is a different pressure behind what would otherwise be a purely 'theoretical' issue. Emotions have an epistemic content insofar as they are object-related, albeit perhaps in a mediated way. This means that they say something not only about those who experience these feelings, but also about what has triggered these feelings: about the world and life as a whole or in detail. It would be desirable for religious education to pay more attention to these forms, especially since a study in Aachen has shown that students are particularly interested in controversies to which students ascribe an emotional and existential significance (Meyer, 2019, pp. 27–29).

*Planned vs. spontaneous controversy?* In the debate on controversial learning, a distinction is made between two levels at which controversiality is addressed in the classroom. The first level involves the possibility of teachers introducing controversy into the classroom in a didactically planned way. This level was the focus of this article. The second level means that students themselves introduce controversy into the classroom, to which the teacher has to react immediately and unplanned. The fact



that this situation is perceived as very challenging by teachers (Meyer, 2019, p. 20; Tuna et al., 2024, pp. 53–54) may be related to the fact that little attention is paid to the first level. After all, understanding how to deal with controversy personally is surely all the more important if controversial learning is not only emphasized in individual thematic cases. Rather, it should become an ongoing principle. Only then will the participants not only become familiar with the controversial perspectives of others in a particular subject area, but also become accustomed to controversy and learn to accept it as legitimate (Mutz, 2006, pp. 85–86). It is therefore important to repeat and practice controversy with the aim of enduring other perspectives, becoming aware of one's own position, transforming mere opinions into well-founded judgements and promoting the corresponding formation of well-founded judgements. It will then become increasingly easy to deal didactically and productively with controversies that students spontaneously bring into the classroom.

*Factual vs. personal dimension?* This article has shown that there are a large number of didactic and empirical examples that take up the factual and personal level of controversy and deal with it productively. However, it cannot be overlooked that it is difficult to fully exploit this special potential in religious education. One reason for this could be that religious education didactics cannot draw on research from other subjects when linking the two levels. Apparently, it is precisely the combination of the two levels that is a unique feature of religious education. At least in other subjects, the development of the factual level is clearly dominant. An essay by Robert F. Dearden (1981), which is received across disciplines and nations and develops different types of controversial topics in the classroom, is decisive for this orientation. However, it remains unclear when these distinctions become significant for students. RE with a correlative orientation must do justice to this relevance-creating requirement. To this end, factual controversy on the one hand and personal controversy on the other must be understood as complementary. This may also require thinking beyond the personal level in the direction of positional controversy in order to ensure that ideological perspectives are not merely determined by the personal situation of their representatives, but can also be argumentatively substantiated and consciously chosen and are therefore also negotiable in terms of 'truth theory'.

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