

## How to Deal with Reference Theories? Exemplary Reflections on Postcolonial Theories and their Aporetic Impact on Religious Education

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**Abstract:** This article examines the reception of reference theories in religious education (RE) using the example of postcolonial theories and, based on Mirjam Schambeck's recently published typology of three types of reception, asks whether her criteria are sufficient when reference theories challenge the axiomatic foundations of RE itself. Postcolonial theories are increasingly being received in RE to uncover power structures, epistemic violence, and marginalization. While their analytical and productive power is undisputed, their often uncritical adoption appears problematic, particularly with regard to the tension between universalism and particularism. A subject-oriented RE that is normatively oriented toward autonomy, freedom, and universal justice comes into conflict when postcolonial theories deconstruct these very universals as Eurocentric and hegemonic. Ultimately, the analysis shows that religious education needs an expanded criteriology that not only tests coherent adaptation, but also reflexively addresses the axiomatic deep effects of theory reception itself. What is needed is a difference-sensitive, self-reflexive universalism that recognizes particularity without falling into epistemic relativism. Only in this way can a critically-enlightened subject-oriented RE productively integrate postcolonial perspectives without contradicting itself.

**Keywords:** religious education, reference theories, postcolonial theories, criteriology, subject-orientation, reception

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Artikel untersucht die Rezeption von Referenztheorien in der Religionspädagogik am Beispiel postkolonialer Theorien und fragt auf der Grundlage von Mirjam Schambecks kürzlich veröffentlichter Typologie dreier Rezeptionsarten, ob ihre Kriterien ausreichend sind, wenn Referenztheorien die axiomatischen Grundlagen der Religionspädagogik selbst in Frage stellen. Postkoloniale Theorien finden zunehmend Eingang in die Religionspädagogik, um Machtstrukturen, epistemische Gewalt und Marginalisierung aufzudecken, wobei ihre analytische und produktive Kraft zwar unbestritten ist, ihre oftmals unkritische Übernahme jedoch problematisch erscheint, insbesondere im Hinblick auf die Spannung zwischen Universalismus und Partikularismus. Eine subjektorientierte Religionspädagogik, die normativ auf Autonomie, Freiheit und universelle Gerechtigkeit ausgerichtet ist, gerät in Konflikt, wenn postkoloniale Theorien genau diese Universalien als eurozentrisch und hegemonial dekonstruieren. Letztlich zeigt die Analyse, dass die Religionspädagogik eine erweiterte Kriteriaologie benötigt, die nicht nur die kohärente Adaption überprüft, sondern auch reflexiv die axiomatischen Tiefeneffekte der Theorieaufnahme selbst thematisiert. Es bedarf eines heterogenitätssensiblen, selbstreflexiven Universalismus, der Individualität anerkennt, ohne in epistemischen Relativismus zu verfallen, denn nur auf diese Weise kann eine kritisch aufgeklärte, subjektorientierte Religionspädagogik postkoloniale Perspektiven produktiv aufnehmen, ohne mit sich selbst in Widerspruch zu geraten.

**Schlagwörter:** Religionspädagogik, Referenztheorien, postkoloniale Theorien, Kriteriaologie, Subjektorientierung, Rezeption

## I. Introduction

In recent years, the science-theoretical processes of self-understanding within religious education (RE) have increasingly developed an awareness that it stands in close exchange with other disciplines. Neither does this refer solely to its grounding in theology, insofar as theology forms its decisive axiomatic foundation, particularly in the Catholic understanding, and it therefore essentially sees itself as a theological discipline (Platzbecker, 2013; Gennerich & Riegel, 2015, pp. 5–6; Platow, 2020, pp. 68–72). Nor does this merely express its fundamental referentiality to the educational sciences or its interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary relationship to other disciplines (on the discourse: Nipkow, 1990; Rothgangel, 2014; Heger, 2017; Schröder, 2021, pp. 212–225). Rather, the reference to other disciplines is already embedded within RE itself, such that it does not merely reflect this relationship in opposition to other disciplines. In this sense, it is to be characterized as a complex, reflexive “interdisciplinary composite science” (Woppowa, 2018, p. 19),<sup>1</sup> which nevertheless can respond formatively in different ways to specific challenges in its contextuality and therefore understands itself as a “multi-perspective action science” (Heger, 2021, p. 531).<sup>2</sup>

Of course, with this statement neither the mode nor the corresponding criteriology has yet been determined through which RE refers to corresponding reference theories, through which it articulates itself as a composite discipline. Is it sufficient if it eclectically draws on certain components of a theory for specific purposes while neglecting others due to insufficient fit? How can it thereby do justice to the intended message of such theories? Or is the claim to systematicity itself too ambitious and should we rather – in light of the perspectival nature of any science – cultivate within the logic of “anything goes” a farewell to what might be called *methodological compulsion* (Feyerabend, 2010)?

So far, such questions appear to have been largely ignored within RE, which is particularly controversial when it comes to theories that affect the axiomatic fundamental orientation of RE as a subject-oriented discipline. RE is interested in the becoming-subject, being-subject, and remaining-subject of adolescents for educational purposes and is therefore normatively oriented toward their autonomy, freedom, and equality (Grümme, 2025, pp. 22–123). But what happens in religious educational terms when RE as such now includes theories which, at least at first glance, threaten to undermine this very subject-orientation, either by questioning free autonomous subjectivity itself or by questioning universalizable claims to justice and truth in general? Postcolonial theories, even though they themselves are heterogeneous and internally differentiated (do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 298; Loomba, 2005, p. 2; Freuding, 2023, p. 35; Henningsen, 2022, p. 10), claim precisely this. However, they are being received with increasing intensity and breadth in various fields of RE at the level of concepts and approaches, forms of learning, and concrete learning paths. Is there a systematicity, a criteriology that is precise enough to provide orientation here?

Mirjam Schambeck (2025) has made a proposal for different modes of reception within the framework of hermeneutical RE that merits examination in a first step. This then enables, secondly, a perspective from which the complex field of religious educational references to postcolonial theories can be viewed and organized in an exemplary manner and, thirdly, discussed with regard to the problematic determination of the relationship between universalism and particularism. This will finally allow a brief concluding look at a further developed criteriology.

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<sup>1</sup> Original quote: “interdisziplinär arbeitende *Verbundwissenschaft*”.

<sup>2</sup> Original quote: “multiperspektivische Handlungswissenschaft”.

## 2. A criteriologically determined hermeneutics of reference theories in RE

Fully aware of the abstract nature of typologies, Schambeck (2025) distinguishes between three types of religious educational applications of reference theories:

Type a. “Explicit but eclectic access” (Schambeck, 2025, p. 323):<sup>3</sup> this refers explicitly to certain reference theories, without considering their internal logic and the associated aporias. One example is semiotic symbol didactics, which draws on various symbol theories but does not take into account the fact that the question of truth in particular plays no role there. Reference theories are thus instrumentalized as an element of an independent recoding of RE, which is justifiable in view of the gains made in RE. The principle of proof of authority, in which major authorities are called upon to highlight certain, mostly pre-intended aspects, serves here as a model of closure (Schambeck, 2025, pp. 323–325).

Type b. “Adopting reference theories with simplifications for both sides” (Schambeck, 2025, p. 325):<sup>4</sup> although reference theories are only perceived in simplified form here too, their reception is accompanied by reductions in complexity and simplifications on the part of RE, as Schambeck (2025, pp. 325–330) illustrates with the complicated history of correlation didactics. An originally systematic-theological *theologoumenon* is schematized to the detriment of both sides by its deductive functionalization in RE and robbed of its actual dynamics. Nevertheless, the reduction on both sides can lead to a mutual gain, insofar as the reception of correlation in RE has contributed to a real renewal of teaching practice, because the lifeworld of the adolescents gained importance in the classroom, also for theological reasons.

Type c. “Exploring reference theories with an adaptive religious educational purpose” (Schambeck, 2025, p. 330):<sup>5</sup> here, RE receives external approaches *coherently* and adapts them in a *coherent* manner because they are fed into religious educational theory formation with “coherent gains in knowledge” (Schambeck, 2025, p. 330).<sup>6</sup> Using the example of the empowerment discourse, Schambeck (2025, pp. 330–332) shows that this enables new insights in RE and thus – similar to abductive reasoning – something new emerges.

The differentiated typology allows Schambeck (2025, pp. 333–334) to derive a criteriology inductively gained through this hermeneutic process. According to these criteria, a responsible and qualitatively sophisticated approach to reference theories requires the following: “*practicing epistemic modesty*”<sup>7</sup> by examining whether the entire reference theory actually needs to be received; “*making the speaker’s position and intentions transparent*”<sup>8</sup> from the outset; “*making religious-pedagogical conclusions and adaptations transparent*”<sup>9</sup> by explicitly marking where insights derive from the reference theory and where religious-pedagogical processing occurs; identifying and “*marking eclecticism*”<sup>10</sup> coherently; “*checking the ongoing suitability*”<sup>11</sup> and fit of the reference theory; and, last but not least, clarifying the pattern of inference (deductive, inductive, or abductive) used to draw on reference theories and “*whether*

<sup>3</sup> Original quote: “Expliziter, aber eklektischer Zugriff”.

<sup>4</sup> Original quote: “Aufgreifen von Referenztheorien mit Verkürzungen für beide Seiten”.

<sup>5</sup> Original quote: “Ausloten von Referenztheorien in adaptierender religionspädagogischer Absicht”.

<sup>6</sup> Original quote: “kohärenten Erkenntniszugewinnen”.

<sup>7</sup> Original quote: “epistemische Bescheidenheit praktizieren”.

<sup>8</sup> Original quote: “Sprecher:innenposition und -absicht transparent machen”.

<sup>9</sup> Original quote: “religionspädagogische Schlussfolgerungen/Adaptionen transparent machen”.

<sup>10</sup> Original quote: “Eklektizismen markieren”.

<sup>11</sup> Original quote: “Passungsfähigkeit bleibend überprüfen”.

*this sufficiently respects both the internal logic of the reference theory and the formation of religious educational theory”.*<sup>12</sup>

These criteria should enable RE to include theories in a selective and well-founded manner. The benefits for processes of self-understanding in RE are obvious, as this criteriology enables a logic of distinctions and different modes of reception. It raises awareness of blind spots in reception as well as of the challenges and provocative impulses of the theories being received.

Nevertheless, the axiomatic depth effect of reception processes of certain theories does not seem to have been sufficiently considered, nor have any criteria for such a mode of reception been established. As the last quotation articulates, Schambeck seems to continue to assume, in all reception of theories, a juxtaposition between the inherent logic of RE and reference theories in their own logic. But what happens when a reference theory is adopted that, through its reception, radically questions the axioms of RE itself by affecting, above all, the categories of subject-orientation and the claims to justice and truth and assumptions of universality asserted therein? What happens if this transforms RE in terms of both fundamental theory and scientific theory? What criteria would RE have at its disposal in such a case?

The radical nature of such questions is currently manifesting itself particularly in one field: the reception of postcolonial theories in RE.

### **3. Postcolonial perspectives as reference theories in RE**

#### **3.1 Mapping the reception of postcolonial theories in RE**

In recent years, the use of postcolonial theories as reference theories has become established in Christian RE, albeit to varying degrees and with varying scope (Ahme, 2021; 2022; Baring, 2022; Brandstetter, 2020; 2023; 2025; Brandstetter & Lehner-Hartmann, 2023; Burrichter & Gärtner, 2023; Drath & Woppowa, 2023; Freuding, 2022; 2023; 2024; Gearon, 2021; Gearon et al., 2021; Hemshorn de Sánchez, 2024; Henningsen, 2022; 2024; Henningsen & Herbst, 2022; Herbst, 2023; Hong, 2025; Koch & Schambeck, 2023; Konz, 2022; 2023; 2024; Konz & Schröter, 2023; Matamba, 2021; Schellenberg, 2023; Scholz, 2018; Scholz & Winkler, 2020; Schweitzer, 2024; Silber, 2023; Simojoki, 2018; 2019; 2024a; Stockinger & Ziegler, 2023; Vasser Santos Batista, 2025; Winkler, 2022; Winkler & Carroll, 2021; Winkler & Scholz, 2021).<sup>13</sup> In addition to programmatic considerations, empirical analyses and didactic models have now emerged that sharpen the focus on colonial power and knowledge structures in the context of RE.

Without going into Schambeck’s typology directly (yet), it is noticeable that postcolonial perspectives are often used in an affirmative manner in RE – for example, as an argumentative resource to justify diversity, recognition, or anti-racism. Less attention is paid to the fact that postcolonial theories themselves are fraught with fundamental tensions, inconsistencies, or simplifications (Ahme, 2021; 2022; Baring, 2022; Freuding, 2022; 2023; 2024; Gearon, 2021; Gearon et al., 2021; Henningsen, 2022; Henningsen & Herbst, 2022; Herbst, 2023; Vasser Santos Batista, 2025), especially with regard to the relationship between universalism and particularism, which will be clarified later and which raises the question of the extent to which criteria for high-quality access to reference theories are being adhered to. In other academic disciplines there has been a much more in-depth discussion of this issue even before postcolonial theories really arrived in RE (Acha, 2018; Anievas & Nişancioğlu, 2017; Chibber, 2013; lately: Thomä, 2025, pp. 233–318; Grümme, 2023a, pp. 122–136). Alongside constructive debates,

<sup>12</sup> Original quote: “ob diese sowohl die *Eigenlogik der Referenztheorie als auch der religionspädagogischen Theoriebildung genügend achtet*”.

<sup>13</sup> Despite the extensive list of references, this overview does not claim completeness. The reception of postcolonial theories in RE is developing dynamically, and new contributions are constantly being added.

postcolonial theories have increasingly become targets of political controversy: they are accused of being a woke political ideology that has gained interpretive authority in the humanities, systematically suppressing dissenting positions (Schröter, 2024, p. 232) – because anyone who disagrees is accused of “defending racist, colonialist, or imperialist attitudes for their own benefit and to shut out the viewpoints of others” (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020, p. 87). Furthermore, through their cynical “disparagement of science and reason as provincial Western ways of knowing [...] this claim is not only factually wrong, morally vacant, and patronizing; it is also negligent and dangerous” (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020, p. 86). Regardless of this at times questionable polemic, interdisciplinary scientific debates show that the question of the relationship between universalism and particularism is by no means just a theoretical side issue but has direct consequences for the understanding of RE (and education in general), normative orientation, and theological practice.

In this context, a central question arises as to how postcolonial approaches deal with existing universals such as justice. Although these are rightly critically reflected upon as part of colonial knowledge formations, this also threatens to delegitimize normative points of reference that are indispensable for RE and political agency. In order to enable a precise critical examination and classification of the current reception of postcolonial theories in RE, it is first necessary to clarify, albeit briefly, what is meant by them and how they have been used in RE to date:

Postcolonial theories are to be understood as a vague “set of discursive practices [...] that resist colonialism, colonialist ideologies, and their legacies” and encompass a wealth of methodological approaches that are used in a wide range of interdisciplinary fields and in a variety of institutional contexts (do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, pp. 25–26; additionally introductory: Kerner, 2021).<sup>14</sup> Even if homogeneity cannot be assumed within the theories, “the key maneuver [...] in all these diverse approaches [still seems to] lie in ‘intervention’” (do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 25). This intervention challenges Eurocentric narratives with the aim of dismantling and transforming hegemonic structures (do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 25).<sup>15</sup> Dieter Thomä (2025, p. 250) also attempts to introduce a certain homogeneity amid the diversity by dividing postcolonial theories into three groups: “[t]he first group, in short, sets out to go outside, the second seeks to fight from below, and the third focuses on infiltration. They can be assigned the keywords ‘indigenous’, ‘subaltern, intersectional’, and ‘hybrid’”.<sup>16</sup> Whether this is an oversimplification is not to be discussed further here, although it should be noted that such reductive tendencies can reach their analytical limits, especially in contexts where no distinction is even made between postcolonial and decolonial theories. Not least, this should be relevant to our purposes because a clear distinction is not always made in RE (as one example of many: Simojoki, 2024b, p. 84). Decolonial theories (for an overview: Schulze & Wolfesberger, 2025), similar to postcolonial theories, focus on the continuity of (post-)colonial relations of power and domination after the formal end of colonialism, and locate their common bond in the critique and overcoming of Eurocentrism (do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 331). Among further differences that cannot be specified here, one of the central distinctions between postcolonial and decolonial theories lies in the spatial and temporal foundation and location of modernity, whose beginning, for decolonial theorists, is not to be found in the Enlightenment or in British colonialism in the 19th century in Asia and Africa, but rather in the conquest and invention of the Americas and the discovery of the Other in 1492 (to deepen: Dussel, 1993; Schulze & Wolfesberger, 2025, p. 15). Some decolonial theorists

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<sup>14</sup> Original quote: “ein Set diskursiver Praktiken [...], die Widerstand leisten gegen Kolonialismus, kolonialistische Ideologien und ihre Hinterlassenschaften”.

<sup>15</sup> Original quote: “Das Schlüsselmanöver ist [...] bei all diesen diversen Ansätzen ‘Intervention’”.

<sup>16</sup> Original quote: “Die erste Gruppe macht sich – kurz gesagt – auf den Weg nach draußen, die zweite sucht den Kampf von unten, die dritte setzt auf Infiltration. Ihnen lassen sich die Stichworte ‘indigen’, ‘subaltern, intersektional’ und ‘hybrid’ zuordnen”.

explicitly criticize the dependence on and adaptation to Eurocentric frameworks by postcolonial theories (Grosfoguel, 2011), as they lead to the “reproduction of monotopical hermeneutics [...], with its privilege of controlling knowledge and meaning from the position of sameness and through inventing its otherness. Hence the postcolonial discourse still interprets the (post)colonial other for the same, in a language that the same is able to understand and share” (Tlostanova, 2020, p. 168).

It would certainly be worthwhile to develop this tradition further – also in the context of later discussions in our article – since, for example, one of the many decolonial concepts, such as Walter D. Mignolo’s (2007) *epistemic de-linking* from Western universals toward *pluri-versality*, ultimately relocates thought into an exteriority of modernity that destabilizes the traditional notion of universality itself (Schulze & Wolfesberger, 2025, p. 94). The absence of further engagement with decolonial theories on our part is not because we, like Henrik Simojoki (2024b, p. 84) in his contribution on decoloniality, racism, and education, subsume decoloniality under the category of postcoloniality, nor is it because we do not want to draw a line between the two in the existing tradition of RE, as both perspectives deserve individual appreciation, but rather because, to date, there has been no, or only very sporadic, engagement with decolonial theories in German-language RE (exceptions include: Henningsen, 2022; Vasser Santos Batista, 2025; Sallandt, 2025). Were we to continue pursuing the question of how RE engages with decolonial theories as reference theories, and what consequences this has for RE’s self-understanding, we would be moving beyond the scope of our topic while simultaneously finding no sufficient basis on which to proceed. Nonetheless, this should be a subject of future engagement within RE, provided there is an adequate basis for its reception – since RE might rediscover within its own tradition, inherently rooted as it is in both theology and educational sciences, that liberation-theological and -pedagogical approaches were partly precursors to decolonial theories (Schulze & Wolfesberger, 2025, pp. 34–36) *avant la lettre* (Collet, 2024, pp. 246–252), and are in part even constitutive of what is today described as decolonial theories.

Following these boundaries, it becomes clear that postcolonial theories deal primarily with British and French colonialism, while the earlier Iberian colonization of Latin America plays only a marginal role within postcolonial theories (do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 26; Schulze & Wolfesberger, 2025, pp. 14–15; Coronil, 2008, p. 401). The apparent structural dominance of the English-speaking context within selected prominent postcolonial theories cannot be explained by a single cause: among other factors, this is due to the fact that key representatives such as Edward W. Said (against the backdrop of British Mandate rule over Palestine), Gayatri C. Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha (both in the context of colonial India) are specifically linked to British colonialism and later pursued their academic careers at US elite universities (do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 26, pp. 99–100, pp. 161–162, and pp. 229–230). In their literary interventions, they primarily deal with texts from the British canon (in Said’s (1979) case, the main reference is Joseph Conrad), draw considerably on and adapt concepts from the French theoretical tradition, in particular the approaches of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan (do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 26). The resulting tension and dependency is evident in the fact that postcolonial theories want to throw off the *straitjacket* and free themselves from the *stranglehold* of continuing colonial traditions of power and thought, but this path to freedom is often only possible methodologically by drawing on the very hegemonic Western theoretical traditions that are to be criticized and overcome (Thomä, 2025, p. 249). In order to outline, at least briefly, the reception of postcolonial theories in RE, let us now consider three different examples:

Bettina Brandstetter’s (2020) doctoral thesis offers a first example of the use of postcolonial theories in RE, although it should be noted that these are not the only theories of reference – she also draws on

Foucault's discourse theory (Brandstetter, 2020, pp. 24–25).<sup>17</sup> In her doctoral thesis, she examines constellations in kindergarten in which cultural diversity and religious plurality become visible or are associated with them, and which are particularly challenging for early childhood educators (Brandstetter, 2020, pp. 15–16). Her aim is to reveal social structures and power relations and their effects on ways of thinking and educational practices in order to make them accessible for theological reflection and processing (Brandstetter, 2020, pp. 11–12). Brandstetter (2020, p. 25) explicitly understands her approach within the framework of postcolonial theories. This is because she wants to “deconstruct *precarious identity constructions* in connection with ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ [...] and work out alternative forms of thinking, narratives, and contradictions”.<sup>18</sup> Methodologically, she uses the *Holy Trinity* (do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 26; Albrecht, 2025, p. 452) of postcolonial theories – Said, Spivak, and Bhabha (Brandstetter, 2020, pp. 39–44) – and adapts their concepts for such a theologically reflective early childhood education.

A second example is provided by Janosch Freuding's (2022) doctoral thesis, which examines representations and concepts of otherness in interreligious education as part of a meta-reflection on religious educational approaches. He chooses postcolonial theories of othering – primarily those of Said and Spivak – as one of his points of reference, explicitly understanding othering as a term derived from postcolonial theories and using it to analyze discursive attributions of otherness and their institutional stabilization (Freuding, 2022, pp. 17–19). He then intertwines this perspective with approaches based on theories of order and power (particularly Foucault), thereby problematizing the dispositifs of interreligious education and taking up, among other things, the debate on *epistemic violence* (Freuding, 2022, p. 381; on the term: Brunner, 2020). At the same time, he maintains that postcolonial othering research is at odds with experience-oriented concepts of foreignness (Freuding, 2022, p. 20). Nevertheless, Freuding did not simply adopt postcolonial theories without questioning them. He explicitly highlights certain limitations, beginning with a comparison between criticism of Foucault and criticism of Said (Freuding, 2022, p. 343). As Foucault's approach has often been criticized for conceiving power structures so comprehensively that subjects appear to have no *outside*, Said's *Orientalism* similarly risks overstating its case by imputing *complicity* in oppression to almost all European and North American authors who engaged with the *Orient*. Such sweeping accusations, Freuding notes, can easily become both unfair and not precise enough. Especially problematic is the lack of distinction between intentional othering and the unconscious reproduction of structural mechanisms of exclusion. As a result, conscious acts of marginalization or deliberate disregard of exclusionary practices cannot be clearly identified and addressed (Freuding, 2022, pp. 343–344). He also voices reservations regarding Spivak, who underscores the dual meaning of representation: as *speaking for* and as *speaking about*. Applied to the problem of subalternity, this suggests that articulating a claim on behalf of a subaltern group first requires its discursive representation. The less a group is able to articulate this itself, the greater the risk that others will misrepresent it. According to Spivak, Foucault and Gilles Deleuze do not sufficiently acknowledge this ambiguity of representation – a limitation she exposes, even if her argumentation at times appears somewhat eclectic (Freuding, 2022, p. 355).

Jan-Hendrik Herbst (2023) provides a third example that leans more toward a general critique of postcolonial theories. His main concern is to make postcolonial theories useful for teaching practice in RE. He takes a decidedly pragmatic approach, focusing on specific areas of application such as postcolonial biblical exegesis (Herbst, 2023, pp. 157–159), the analysis of teaching materials (Herbst,

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<sup>17</sup> The selection of authors discussed in detail here should be understood as exemplary. Due to the scope of this article, not all voices can be taken into account. However, the works mentioned seem particularly suitable for highlighting the practicability of postcolonial theories in RE

<sup>18</sup> Original quote: “prekäre Identitätskonstruktionen im Zusammenhang mit ‘Kultur’ und ‘Religion’ zu dekonstruieren sowie alternative Denkformen, Erzählungen und Widersprüche herauszuarbeiten”

2023, pp. 159–161), and dealing with religious diversity in the classroom (Herbst, 2023, pp. 154–156). Herbst demonstrates that postcolonial perspectives can provide productive impetus in the religious educational practice. At the same time, he does not settle for a purely affirmative reception but instead identifies three lines of critique: *firstly*, he warns of the danger of reification. In order to make an identity marker such as *religion* or *race* visible, it must be highlighted and brought into focus. The increased sensitivity to certain categories of difference, which is actually intended to weaken their impact, can paradoxically have the opposite effect. By constantly emphasizing and discussing these differences, they risk becoming fixed and perceived as immutable (Herbst, 2023, p. 162; additionally: Grümme, 2018, pp. 419–421). *Secondly*, he recognizes the risk of increasing particularization when looking through postcolonial hermeneutic glasses. In this context, there is a tendency to focus on specific aspects of reality without considering the intersection between these aspects. This can lead to a loss of sight of the areas of shared experience among students and/or to practical overload, as it ignores the fact that human perception is limited and inevitably based on preconceptions. This development is problematic because it contradicts the concept of education in the emphatic sense. Education requires a connection to the general and to the community, which is hindered by excessive particularization (Herbst, 2023, p. 163). *Thirdly*, he points to the risk of a tendency toward totalization, where power and domination structures are assumed to be present everywhere (Herbst, 2023, p. 163).

### 3.2 Exemplary classification in light of Schambeck's typology

All these are important points of criticism and potential pitfalls that can limit the application of postcolonial theories on various levels. However, it is noteworthy that such critiques rarely address the very core of postcolonial theories themselves. The unresolved tension between the necessary critique of colonial legacies and the need for normative reference points thus remains. This observation raises the question of how existing religious educational interpretations of postcolonial theories can be systematically classified and whether they meet the criteria formulated by Schambeck for a responsible and qualitatively sophisticated approach to reference theories, or whether these criteria are even sufficient.

A more detailed examination should be undertaken here with Herbst's (2023) contribution, which is advisable for pragmatic reasons, because unlike the two previously mentioned works by Brandstetter and Freuding, Herbst refers decisively and almost exclusively to postcolonial theories as reference theories, while the other two works also show strong overlaps with poststructuralist theories, and these levels are not always easy to separate, especially since poststructuralist theories were constitutive for the genesis of postcolonial thinking (on their relationship: Hiddleston, 2010). It is precisely this focus that makes Herbst's approach illustrative for Schambeck's systematic classification:

*Firstly*, Herbst explicitly states his speaker's position and intention at the outset: his aim is to identify the practical potential and limitations of postcolonial perspectives in RE. This pragmatic focus on specific teaching contexts is made transparent from the outset. *Secondly*, he focuses on specific areas of application within religious educational practice. He systematically addresses the diagnosis of socio-political conditions of RE, the didactic intensification of learning content through, for example, postcolonial exegesis, and the design of learning formats and media. This pragmatic focus on specific teaching contexts demonstrates what Schambeck calls practicing epistemic modesty – Herbst examines whether and where grand theory needs to be applied or whether the reception of explicitly identified individual aspects is sufficient. He does not attach more importance to the name than to the coherence of the content, so that he can leave the aforementioned *Holy Trinity* aside and focus on concepts that are useful to his approach, such as othering, mimicry, and hybridity. Nevertheless, the question remains whether Herbst, when referring to postcolonial theories, actually addresses the factual situation. After all, these theories do not exist as a closed group, so that instead of subsuming them, he would have to

highlight the various approaches individually, without mentioning the superstructure. Nevertheless, this leads us directly to *thirdly*, the fact that Herbst also demonstrates the inherent logic of certain postcolonial theories by introducing – albeit not in detail, which would be difficult to achieve in a short article – and applying such concepts. He shows how these categories can open new perspectives for interpreting biblical texts and teaching materials (for example: Herbst, 2023, p. 159). This makes it clear that Herbst does not arbitrarily pick up on set pieces but rather emphasizes central categories in their theoretical coherence. This corresponds to Schambeck’s demand to undertake eclecticism in a coherent manner. *Fourthly*, Herbst makes his religious educational adaptations transparent by marking where insights originate from postcolonial theories and where religious educational processing takes place. For example, he underlines that the didactic treatment cannot be about absolutizing postcolonial interpretations, but that they should be introduced and discussed as one possible interpretation within the framework of subject-specific didactic concepts such as controversy or multi-perspectivity (Herbst, 2023, p. 159). In doing so, he also fulfills Schambeck’s criterion of making conclusions and adaptations in RE transparent. *Fifthly*, Herbst identifies the limitations and dangers of postcolonial theories for teaching practice. He warns of the danger of reification, increasing particularization, and the risk of totalizing tendencies. This self-critical dimension illustrates what Schambeck refers to as continuously reviewing adaptability. *Sixthly* and finally, Herbst proposes methodological solutions to these problems. He briefly draws on a concept from gender-reflective education, another external reference theory, and advocates “an adequate and didactically justified *balance between ‘dramatization’ and ‘de-dramatization’* of circumstances [...] relating to cultural differences” (Herbst, 2023, p. 163).<sup>19</sup> In biblical learning, for example, the aim should not be to address a postcolonial perspective in every learning unit, but rather to make informed decisions based on didactic considerations of the pros and cons as to when such a perspective offers added value in terms of the intended learning objectives (Herbst, 2023, p. 164).

This analysis suggests that Herbst’s approach most closely corresponds to Schambeck’s type c, *exploring reference theories with an adaptive religious educational purpose*, even if it could be further discussed here whether the inherent logic of reference theory and religious educational theory formation is given sufficient consideration. The characteristics are evident: Herbst coherently receives postcolonial theories, adapts them for RE in a transparent and coherent manner, and generates insights – similar to abductive reasoning – that can enrich teaching practice. His approach demonstrates both logical reasoning in the add-on effect and elements of the disclosure effect (Schambeck, 2025, pp. 331–332).

He succeeds in conducting a practical risk assessment, as dangers can certainly arise from using this postcolonial lens in a specific teaching context. What Herbst is not doing, however, is to engage in a meta-reflexive examination of the fundamental question of the suitability and compatibility of postcolonial theories with the normative foundations of RE itself. He does not ask whether and to what extent postcolonial theories could fundamentally challenge, for example, subject-orientation, the claim to autonomy, or universal concepts of justice, which are constitutive for RE. Are Schambeck’s criteria sufficient for responsible and high-quality access to reference theories when it comes to dealing with reference theories that could radically question the axiomatic foundations of RE itself? Of course, one could reduce both sides to the extent that they fit together, but would this preserve the internal logic of the reference theory (in our case, the complex postcolonial theories) and the self-understanding of RE?<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Original quote: “eine adäquate und didaktisch begründete Balance zwischen ‘Dramatisierung’ und ‘Entdramatisierung’ von Sachverhalten [...], die sich auf kulturelle Differenzen beziehen”.

<sup>20</sup> Does RE not also do injustice to postcolonial theories when it applies their concepts uncritically and detached from their political and conceptual origins into its own language? Spivak (1993, p. 181) herself emphasizes that “[w]ithout a sense of the rhetoricity of language, a species of neocolonialist construction of the non-Western scene

What happens when a reference theory not only offers new perspectives and poses practical application risks, but also fundamentally challenges the aforementioned categories, which are constitutive for RE? In such cases, the mode of reception would possibly have to go beyond coherent adaptation and suitability testing in terms of practical applicability and include a fundamental examination of the axiological and epistemological implications of the reference theory for the self-image of RE. To put it even more consistently in further development of Schambeck's thoughts: how does one deal with perceived incompatibility?

#### **4. Aporias in the religious educational reception**

These general analyses of the reception of postcolonial theories in RE certainly deserve to be further concretized. For it is only through concretization that the benefits and problems of such a hermeneutics of reception in RE become clearer. If we take the normative provisions of RE as a yardstick, at least as they have been established in the mainstream, then clear distinctions can be made. According to this, RE is formatted in its form of thinking, in its conceptualizations, its forms of learning, and didactic designs as a subject-oriented pedagogy. Subject-orientation forms the axiomatic principle, even if in late modern processes of differentiation and acceleration, this conceptual definition must repeatedly be wrestled from its contexts and historical dynamizations (Schweitzer, 2022; Grümme, 2022). Subject-orientation is therefore a historical, dialectical, and self-reflective concept that cannot be conceptually frozen in this dynamic (on this, already Adorno, 1973; Adorno, 1974). But it is precisely in this dynamic that RE, with its education-theory-oriented, critically-enlightened subject-orientation, insists that subjects can make a beginning (Hannah Arendt), that despite all hermeneutical, historical, political, and economic determinations, they can become involved in a process that aims at their freedom, maturity, and autonomy within structures of justice and freedom (Grümme, 2025, pp. 98–123).

It is exactly this logic of critically-enlightened subject-orientation that makes postcolonial theories of utmost interest in two respects:

a. Analytically, they can expose the mechanisms of power and hegemony that epistemologically counteract the goals of this subject-orientation. They reveal structures and practices of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) that befall subjects when they are not treated as equals and as having equal rights. They mark places of religious educational thinking and religious educational practices where subjects are not heard, where their voices are silenced, marginalized, or muted. If children's theology can be understood as a radicalization of subject-orientation in RE, because here children are not only read in the pattern of correlative didactics in a dialogical relationship between tradition and experience, but are also attested to have their own distinctive and irreplaceable voice as producers of theology and as theologians (Grümme, 2015, pp. 243–244), then it is not surprising that religious educational child and youth theology draws on postcolonial theories (Grümme, 2023b; Simojoki, 2023). Like hardly any other theory, postcolonial theories allow the interdependence of hegemony, justice, and freedom regarding practices, speaker positions, epistemological and economic structures to be exposed with great clarity and to demonstrate their lasting effectiveness.

b. This is precisely where the productive strand of postcolonial theories becomes apparent. By exposing mechanisms of othering, essentialization, and homogenization as epistemological practices of injustice and marginalization, and by revealing economic structures of power and exclusion, they gain both the motivational and critical potential to counteract these tendencies. Things cannot and must not remain as they are and must change, which is why postcolonial theories are being applied in fields as diverse as a praxeological investigation of religious educational practices and the overcoming of the counter-

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is afoot". Simply transferring the content betrays the original text and shows "rather dubious politics" (Spivak, 1993, p.191).

intentional effects of stigmatization (Grümme, 2021), addressing, and disadvantage in very different fields of RE, as well as in RE for sustainable development and a religious educational theology of sustainability (Bederna, 2019; Gärtner, 2020; Stockinger & Ziegler, 2023; as a postcolonial background: Mbembe, 2025, pp. 175–208).

It is precisely this demand for justice, recognition, participation, and inclusion that reveals the aporia of postcolonial theory formation and, in the process, the problem of an unbroken, unenlightened religious educational reception in which RE does not allow this reception to become self-reflective and critically productive in dealing with the recognizable aporias. Probably one of the main problems of postcolonial theories lies in the overly simplistic relationship between universalism and particularism, which not only leads to epistemological and ethical relativism, but also tends toward a polarizing escalation of neotribal identity politics and can cultivate parochial thinking (Thomä, 2025, pp. 233–318; Grümme, 2023a, pp. 122–136). This relationship threatens to counteract the claim of subject-orientation itself and thus make RE self-contradictory. Insofar as subject-orientation is essentially based on a normative orientation toward adolescents remaining subjects, becoming subjects, and being subjects in educational processes (Grümme, 2025, pp. 22–123), its universal validity is determined by this normative dynamic. Either this claim applies to everyone, at all times and in all places, or it does not apply at all. Certainly, it would be important not to use this universalism to gloss over the concrete subjects, their life worlds, and their contextual struggle for identity, freedom, and self-determination in a holistic-universalistic approach, thereby marginalizing these subjects once again and silencing their voices. But this claim would also be performatively undermined if it were relativized in view of diverse identities and contexts and justified with an epistemological recourse to a Eurocentric, neo-colonial, and thus per se imperialistic-hegemonic concept of reason.

The debate between Amy Allen and Rainer Forst, which has since become highly significant in philosophical and theological discourse on postcoloniality, shows how contextual particularism and universalism can be formatted without exaggerating or neglecting either pole in an aporetic manner (on the discourse: Allen, 2016; Allen & Mendieta, 2019; Forst, 2017; 2024; also: Jaeggi, 2025; Allen & Mendieta, 2018; with a decolonial Latin-American perspective: Allen & Mendieta, 2021). Allen draws attention to the potentially violent effects of Western rationality, which tends to reshape the particularity of subjects, and directs her criticism at those traditions of Kantian and Hegelian thought that are currently being articulated in critical theory in particular. Allen (2016, p. 137), who relates postcolonial and poststructuralist hermeneutics to each other, but at the same time reads them within the horizon of critical theory, sees the universalistic figure of justification as the cause of an epistemology of violence, exclusion, and oppression, because it “explicitly or implicitly excludes, represses, or dominates all that is associated with the so-called Other of reason, whether that be understood in terms of madness, irrationality, the emotions, the affects, embodiment, or the imagination, all of which are symbolically associated with black, queer, female, colonized, and subaltern subjects” (for the following, also the explanations provided by: Grümme, 2021, pp. 370–377). If the ideals of the Enlightenment are to be upheld at all, then only through their radical transformation. In doing so, it is important to analyze how these ideals are structurally and epistemologically linked to *epistemic violence* and *colonial power relations*. “For example, the realization of freedom requires the uncovering of the conceptual and normative violence implicit in the norm of freedom itself, such as uncovering how the autonomy of the subject depends on the domination of inner nature or the disciplining of the body or the denial of full subjectivity to those who are deemed wholly Other or object” (Allen, 2016, p. 204). This transformative view of the Enlightenment is also advocated from another, even more postcolonial perspective (Dhawan, 2024).

In contrast, the indispensability of universal categories can be clearly demonstrated by our own claim to recognize everyone in their voice and participation and to unconditionally honor their “right to have

rights” (Hannah Arendt). In this context, a universalism that transcends context demonstrates its power to critique and provide orientation in the face of postcolonial and culturalist relativizations. “Without the abstract idea of humanity, it is completely unclear what is wrong with racism in the first place”,<sup>21</sup> notes philosopher Omri Boehm (2022, p. 62) against the backdrop of his biblically motivated and Kant-inspired radical universalism. To put it in Kantian terms, as formulated by Forst (2017, p. 5): “[W]ho would want to suggest to a critic of the Indian caste system who rejects this system in toto that she should please proceed in an ‘immanent’ way? Or remind a critic of patriarchy in a given society in which this was hardly ever challenged that she should not speak a ‘foreign language’”? These are the kinds of arguments that Uma Narayan, an Indian feminist philosopher, also uses to criticize postcolonial rejection of normative universalism, insofar as she draws attention to the latent danger of postcolonial theory formation immunizing itself against criticism. “Political rhetoric that polarizes ‘Western’ and ‘Non-western’ values risks obscuring the degree to which economic and political agendas, carried out in collaboration between particular Western and Third World elites, work to erode the rights and quality of life for many citizens in both Western and Third World contexts” (Narayan, 1998, p. 99; also: Biskamp, 2016). Rahel Jaeggi (2018, p. 192), who differs from Allen in her normative universalism (von Redecker, 2018), argues (despite her reservations about Forst’s transcendental Kantianism) similarly to Forst: “As Uma Narayan rightfully holds, ‘refusing to judge’ doesn’t solve the problem since it can easily turn into yet another ‘western gesture that confirms the moral inequality of the Third World cultures by shielding them from moral and political evaluations that ‘western’ contexts and practices are subject to’”. Theologically, it is therefore interesting that precisely such an immunization strategy can be observed in parts of the African Catholic Church, as they vehemently oppose the blessing of homosexual partnerships promulgated in the Vatican’s declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*, arguing that claiming universal rights for all in their free self-determination constitutes a neocolonial act of epistemic violence against indigenous African traditions (Ambongo Besungu, 2024).

Without further reconstructing these inherently complex and highly dynamic debates, it is at least clear that the unbroken reception of postcolonial theories can have serious, even contradictory implications for a decidedly subject-oriented RE. At the same time, however, these discussions draw attention to the postcolonial necessity that a merely formal universalism constructed along the lines of idealism raises serious problems of its own. Hans Joas (2025) recently attempted to develop a moral universalism that is aware of the dangers of its political instrumentalization and, at the same time, of the inevitability of concrete cultures and individuals, without tending toward epistemic violence. Moral universalism therefore refers to a moral orientation “that does not measure goodness according to its usefulness for a particular human community and that also questions what is considered good in itself in terms of what it means for other people outside a particular community. Moral universalists are therefore guided by a concept of humanity that transcends all particular collectives such as family, tribe, people, state, nation, and religious community. It is a normatively charged concept of ‘humanity’ that can also extend beyond the people living today to the conditions of existence of future humans and the suffering of people in the past” (Joas, 2025, pp. 40–41).<sup>22</sup> The concept of universalism formulated here can be linked to the discourses justifying human rights, which, based on axial age considerations, is in fact the project

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<sup>21</sup> Original quote: “Ohne die abstrakte Idee vom Menschen ist völlig unklar, was am Rassismus überhaupt falsch sein soll”.

<sup>22</sup> Original quote: “die das Gute nicht nach seiner Nützlichkeit für eine partikulare Menschengemeinschaft bemißt und die das für an sich gut Gehaltene auch daraufhin befragt, was es für andere Menschen außerhalb einer bestimmten Gemeinschaft bedeutet. Für moralische Universalisten ist also eine Vorstellung von Menschheit leitend, die alle partikularen Kollektive wie Familie, Stamm, Volk, Staat, Nation, Religionsgemeinschaft überschreitet. Es handelt sich um einen normativ aufgeladenen Begriff von ‚Menschheit‘, der auch noch über die gegenwärtig lebenden Menschen hinaus auf die Existenzbedingungen der zukünftigen Menschen und die Leiden von Menschen in der Vergangenheit zielen kann”.

of humanity in all its diversity and not the hegemonic project of Eurocentric reason (Joas, 2025, pp. 561–611; Joas, 2013, pp. 173–194), even if this human rights universalism has been and continues to be used to pursue imperialist policies (for example, by the US government). What is needed, therefore, is a concept of universalism that is self-reflective in its attention to its instrumentalizations and hegemonic tendencies, on the one hand, and sensitive to differences and contextual heterogeneities, on the other. This would then be a universalism that recognizes that “universality cannot exist without dialectics, without contradictions”,<sup>23</sup> and which therefore correlates fundamentally with difference and must become practical as “universalizing difference” (Balibar, 2025, pp. 154–155).<sup>24</sup> Such a self-reflexive, difference-sensitive universalism, which can be grounded in a form of thinking based on the theory of alterity (Grümme, 2023a, pp. 147–168), could also be what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008, p. 255) means when, drawing on postcolonial theories, he qualifies “European thought [as] a gift to us all”. An essential criterion for the true universality of such universalism, a genuine “touchstone of truth” (Immanuel Kant), would be its acceptability from everyone’s point of view, as Floris Biskamp (2025, p. 9) puts it with reference to Seyla Benhabib: “[t]he true test of the universality of the normative framework of emancipation is the question of whether non-Northwestern, formerly colonized societies choose to make this framework their own when they have the chance”.

This means in terms of RE: particularly when subject-oriented RE is interested in justice and freedom for subjects, when it wants to critically analyze injustice and contribute to education in universal solidarity and justice (John & Mette, 2024; Mette, 2021; Peukert, 1988), a certain universalism remains indispensable.

## 5. Religious educational perspectives

A subject-oriented RE can gain important insights from these debates on universalism and particularism, which are reconstructed here in an overly simplified manner, for the problem of dealing with reference theories discussed in these considerations. This insight lies not only in the recognition that the internal logic of postcolonial theories and their claim to justice and freedom for all, to equal participation and to everyone being heard, but also in their hermeneutic-praxeological insight into the hegemonic structures of human language, practices, and symbolic identity constructions, that this insight is best served by a transformed, difference-sensitive universalism based on the theory of alterity. Precisely when RE axiomatically understands itself as subject-oriented RE, it is important to anchor oneself in a corresponding form of thinking and to articulate from this basis.

But this also provides a criterion for the reception of reference theories. Not only should a reference theory be adopted in certain sections and fields in a selective, eclectic, or holistic manner in an unbroken and unreflective way that runs counter to this criteriology of equality, freedom, and critically-enlightened criticism of one’s own hermeneutics and practices. This would already be a significant achievement. Above all, greater consideration should be given to what is overshadowed in Schambeck’s criteria. These tend to construct a theoretical objectivism, as if RE, in its own logic, were opposed to other reference theories as objects. This may be the case with regard to certain theories whose reception tends to concern specific limited fields of RE in terms of content and form, as Schambeck (2025, pp. 330–332) herself impressively demonstrates regarding the empowerment theorem. However, where fundamental theoretical issues are concerned, where discussions take place at the level of the religious educational form of thinking (about this term: Grümme, 2019, pp. 9–41), this distance, or even juxtaposition, between religious educational logic and the logic of other theories cannot be maintained. Understanding certain theories as tools does not only fail to do justice to the state of discussion in the

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<sup>23</sup> Original quote: “Universalität nicht ohne Dialektik, ohne Widersprüche zu haben ist”.

<sup>24</sup> Original quote: “universalisierende Differenz”.

philosophy and theology of technology. According to this view, technology itself has a relational character insofar as it already has effects that are simultaneously co-constructed by subjects under the influence of contextual political-cultural conditions. There are no such things as neutral technology or value-free tools (Grümme, 2025, pp. 167–194). If we take this insight seriously, then we must also analyze, critique, and, where necessary, critically examine the effect of received theories on the religious-educational form of thinking. This is precisely what happens with the reception of postcolonial theories. Whether it is (in Schambeck's terminology) the eclectic (type a), the deductive (type b), or the adaptive-transformational form of reception (type c), RE is affected in different ways in its axiomatic assumptions of freedom, equality, autonomous subjectivity, and justice. Reception changes the structure of RE in its form of thinking. In this interpretation, postcoloniality thus shapes RE itself in its multitude of manifestations at different levels. If we take the critically-enlightened subject-orientation assumed here as a normative criterion of RE, then this certainly allows the reception of postcolonial theories. But RE must be aware of what it is doing, what hermeneutic, analytical, and normative-constructive potential it gains, but also what counter-intentional problems it brings upon itself. A RE that wants to be fair and claims to be an education for justice would, in any case, only be able to draw on postcolonial theories in an unbroken, unreflective manner at the price of self-contradiction.

Nevertheless, further differentiation would be necessary here. The phenomenon of postcolonial theory is too complex in itself and also needs to be explored more closely in terms of its difference from decoloniality (do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, pp. 330–338; Vasser Santos Batista, 2025, pp. 43–47; examples include: Dussel, 2013; Mignolo, 2011; Segato, 2022; Quijano, 2024). The same applies to parallel discourses in the context of the materialistic turn, in which RE deals intensively with the agency and educational content of things and materialities – actor-network theory is an important point of reference here (Cress, 2021; Altmeyer, 2021; in addition: Grümme, 2025, pp. 163–175, and pp. 377–400). In this respect, a horizon for further research opens here, which should be pursued precisely for the sake of the logic and normativity of subject-oriented RE. Unless, of course, one wishes to abandon this axiom of subject-orientation, not least by drawing on the theories alluded to in this text. But then this should also be clearly stated and terminologically indicated.

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