

Introduction: Religion and Controversies in Schools

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In liberal democracies, different approaches are taken towards religious diversity. On one hand, religious claims to validity are kept within the private sphere or religious communities. On the other hand, religious actors – such as those within civil society – can collaborate with governmental and political authorities if they do not assert religious absoluteness and instead convey their understanding of the world in secular terms.

Schools, as public institutions, provide an example of how this liberal approach to plurality does not exclude conflicts, even fundamental ones (e.g., Ludwig & Summer, 2023). Religious controversies are clearly expressed in the public sphere within schools (e.g., Middle East conflict, evolution vs. creationism) and are acted upon (e.g., prayer room, headscarves for teachers, participation in swimming lessons, sex education) (e.g., Cassar et al., 2023).

Schools in liberal democracies need to balance the tension between ideological neutrality and taking a position in support of liberal-democratic values. For example, school representatives sometimes take certain positions within these controversies (e.g., social affiliation of religious groups, holidays, rituals, religious symbols), thereby symbolically reinforcing the cultural order. In addition, there are state–church arrangements such as denominational religious education, in which a particular worldview-based positionality constitutes the legal and didactic foundation.

Religious controversies in schools are both a social reality and a didactic-pedagogical challenge (e.g., Lehner-Hartmann et al., 2022). The relationship between religion and controversy is ultimately relevant to the subjects and objects of education in schools. What makes controversies both intriguing and challenging is that they entail a threefold abstraction in the context of schooling, an abstraction from the specific topic, the subject-specific perspective, and the social context, given that controversies and school education exist in most countries worldwide (e.g., Ho et al., 2017). At the same time, this also demands taking the distinct logics of these three domains into account.

In this special issue of the journal *Religionspädagogische Beiträge. Journal for Religion in Education*, we address this complexity by focusing particularly on religious topics and religious disciplines (e.g., theology and religious studies) as well as on exemplary contexts (Germany, Israel, Norway, and the UK). Our goal is to systematically consolidate the discourse on religion and controversies, which has so far been addressed only in isolated articles, and to advance an integrative field of research at an international level (e.g., Schweitzer & Schreiner, 2020). To this end, we also build on the first special issue on this topic published to date: “Teaching Controversial Issues and Religion” (von der Lippe, 2023). However, both for the mentioned special issue and for more recent projects and publications, it is evident that the relationship between conflicts and controversies on the one hand, and religion and religious education on the other, is primarily being explored in the Anglo-American context—and even more so in Scandinavian countries. Exemplary in this regard are the recent publication “Controversial

Issues in Religious Education on Ethics, Values, and Beliefs: Perspectives from Northern Europe” (Franck & Liljefors Persson, 2025) and the current project “ConCitizen – Contested Narratives and Controversial Issues in Citizenship Education”, which is led by, among others, Eva Lindhardt and Britta Kornholt. Thus, while this special issue draws on this body of research, it systematically expands it by including contributions from other contexts—particularly the German-speaking countries, where religious education in schools is, in principle, organized differently from that in Northern Europe, namely as denominational religious education. This approach presents unique challenges and opportunities for addressing controversies in the classroom. Furthermore, we include additional authors and disciplinary perspectives, such as denominational theology.

One main context and an important motivation for this special issue originated from a research group on religion-related controversies, the so-called *Forschungsgruppe religionsbezogene Kontroversen* (Aydoğan et al., 2025). It is based on two projects whose complementary structures provided the special issue’s impetus and try to help bridge “the normative-empirical divide in the field of democratic education” (Drerup, 2023, p. 341):

1. the DIKo project, “Islam” in controversy (“Der Islam” in der Kontroverse), which is the focus of the contribution by Miguel Zulaica y Mugica, Lisa Jacoby, and Meryem Aydoğan. Within the framework of the DIKo project (2023–2025), group discussions were conducted with students, teachers, and parents on Islam-related controversies. Particular attention was given to reconstructing the trigger points embedded within these debates. We gratefully acknowledge the support and funding of this project by the Ministry of Culture and Science of North Rhine-Westphalia as well as the Network for Extremism Research, CoRE-NRW.
2. the project “KoTheRU” (Kontroverse Themen im konfessionellen Religionsunterricht), which is the background of the paper by Johanna Hanke, Jan-Hendrik Herbst, and Henrike Herdramm. Within the framework of this Mixed-Methods-project (2023–2027), we investigate how Christian religious education teachers think about controversial issues. We gratefully acknowledge the support and funding of this project by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) as well as the TU Dortmund’s funding structures Young Academy and Gesellschaft der Freunde der TU Dortmund.

The aim of this special issue is to consolidate and systematise the aforementioned interdisciplinary perspectives on religion-related controversies across the following four sections and to integrate them into an international field of research.

Part I: Basic theoretical perspectives: religion – democracy – controversy

In their contribution *Justification and Compromise in Contemporary Democratic Theory about Religion*, Manon Westphal and Svenja Ahlhaus analyze from a political science perspective the significance of two democratic modes of conflict resolution—justification and compromise—in relation to religious controversies. They further connect these modes to central questions of civic education in schools. Emil Sætra, in *Controversial Issues, Criteria, and Religion: A Radical Perspective on the Criterion Debate and Some Remarks on Its Relevance for Religious Education*, revisits the debate on criteria of controversial issues in the philosophy of education. Rather than drawing strict lines between discussable and non-discussable controversies or prescribing fixed orientations for teachers, he argues for a context-dependent reflection on multiple criteria. His position is rooted in plural educational aims and the diversity of societies. In Germany, this debate about criteria is conducted particularly in the context of the Beutelsbach Consensus (1976), which has also been adapted in other subjects such as religion and philosophy within their own professional ethics—e.g., the so-called “Schwerter Konsent” (2022) (Herbst et al., 2023). From a (catholic) theological perspective, Martin Breul develops in *Why Can’t We All Just Get Along? A Theology of Conflict* the argument that religious questions are necessarily controversial. Controversy, he contends,

is not a flaw of religion but an indispensable dimension of theology — indeed, a methodological treasure. Miguel Zulaica y Mugica, Lisa Jacoby, and Meryem Aydogan contribute an empirical-reconstructive study entitled *“Islam” in Controversy and the Violation of Sacredness as a Trigger Point*. They examine Islam-related controversies and reconstruct the affective-emotional dimension of religion-related controversies. By identifying violations of sacredness as a trigger point, they offer a heuristic framework to describe the unique structure of such controversies.

Part 2: Pedagogical and didactical perspectives: Religious controversies in schools and classrooms

Perspectives on religious education from the German-speaking region are specifically addressed in Part 2. Sebastian Eck opens this section with *Controversiality?! Structural Problems and Didactic Design Options in RE*. He provides insight into the current German-language debate on controversiality with respect to conceptual distinctions, didactic strategies, and empirical findings. After diagnosing a lack of controversy in religious education, he develops both analytical perspectives and forward-looking approaches. In *“Positional Controversy” in Islamic Religious Education*, Mehmet Tuna introduces the principle of “positional controversy.” He draws on the Islamic discursive tradition of *ikhtilāf* to frame it as a pedagogical principle that enables students, within the plurality of religious traditions, teachings, and perspectives, to develop judgement and form their own standpoint. Positionality is also a key issue in *Navigating Controversial Issues in German Denominational RE: Discussing Challenges and Opportunities in an Era of Growing Super-Diversity* by Johanna Hanke, Jan-Hendrik Herbst, and Henrike Herdramm. Based on systematic and empirical research, they highlight both opportunities and limitations of denominational religious education for addressing controversies. They show that the strength of denominational RE, given that didactic standards are upheld, lies precisely in its positionality.

Part 3: International perspectives: religion-related controversies outside the German-speaking world

Aina Hammer, in *Critical Pedagogy in Practice: Forum Theatre as an Approach to Addressing Controversial Issues in Norwegian Religious Education*, examines Augusto Boal’s forum theatre as a didactic method for dealing with controversies. She analyzes whether this interactive approach creates accessible discursive spaces for marginalized perspectives and generates potential for empowerment. Angela Quartermaine contributes *Navigating Controversy in British Classrooms: A Reflection on Discussing the Religious Connections to Terrorism within Schools*. She explores the effects of counterterrorism and prevention discourses in the UK on classroom discussions of religiously motivated political violence. Drawing on six case studies, she documents how these controversies are silenced and how such silencing can have counterproductive effects on prevention efforts. In his comparative study *Avoidant Pedagogy: Swiss and Israeli Teachers’ Handling of Religiously Offensive Remarks in Class*, Shahar Gindi investigates how teachers deal with intolerant religious remarks by students. Based on in-depth interviews, he finds that teachers tend to flatter and oversimplify such comments. He argues that this tendency stems from a lack of understanding of racism.

Part 4: In Debate – An Exemplary Academic Controversy

The fourth part addresses the current debate on wokeness as an exemplary controversy that has gained urgency amid rising political authoritarianism and social polarization. This controversy is conducted through identity-politics-framed discourses on racism, antisemitism, or gender. It involves discursive dynamics of opening and closing – around free speech, academic freedom, and social policy (e.g., quotas) – and manifests in controversies over textbooks, teaching materials, teacher positions, and sex education. Assessments of this discourse are themselves controversial (e.g., Waddington et al. 2024). Are current tensions and problematic trends effects of wokeness’s normative horizon and social-

theoretical assumptions? Or does such criticism signal a broader societal rollback? Both positions are represented here.

Lisa Jacoby and Miguel Zulaica y Mugica introduce and historically contextualize the following two contributions: Wolfgang Sander, in *No Controversiality without Positionality: Perspectives on Political and Religious Education between Diversity and Cultural Identity* (Keine Kontroversität ohne Positionalität. Perspektiven politischer und religiöser Bildung zwischen Vielfalt und kultureller Identität), examines the normative foundations of controversiality as a didactic principle and the relationship between religion and politics. He argues that the exclusivist claims of wokeness as a quasi-religion must be subject to critique and that civic education should resist “premature bans on thinking and speaking.” In *Strong feelings – Wokeness as a controversial topic in Christian religious education* (Starke Gefühle – Wokeness als kontroverses Thema christlicher Religionspädagogik), Vera Uppenkamp situates wokeness as a religion-related controversy shaped by power relations, affective dynamics, and questions of positionality in educational contexts. From a theological and didactic perspective, the contribution develops a human-rights-oriented positionality for Christian religious education that critically engages anti-woke strategies while resisting both depoliticisation and the relativisation of human dignity.

Part 5: Epilogue and Conclusion

The issue concludes with *Epilogue: Religion and Controversies in Schools – A Global Field of Re-search* by Cyril Brandt, Jacques Tati Mwakupemba, and Jan-Hendrik Herbst. Drawing on a case study of controversies in schools in the Democratic Republic of Congo, they outline religion and controversy as a global research field. They show how religion can shape democratic education in conflict regions while also addressing the accompanying challenges and limitations. In doing so, they decenter the Eurocentric lens on controversies and their study.

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