RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CHALLENGE: THE CENTRE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION RESEARCH (ZENTRUM FÜR RELIGIONS-PÄDAGOGISCHE BILDUNGSFORSCHUNG, ZRB)

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What is the significance of religious speech in a free and pluralist society? To what extent did the Reformation shape our modern-day understanding of education? How should the subject of religious studies be taught in contexts that are to a large extent non-denominational? Which approaches to handling the pluralism of religion and worldview that exist within our society should be initiated by textbooks in the subjects of ethics, history or religious studies? Do religion and education constitute resources for later life? Can we conceive of a global education without religious education? To what extent can the model of a denominational religious studies in schools as practised in most German federal states be explained in terms of German history?

Questions such as these illustrate important issues for the academic discipline of religious education (Religionspädagogik). At the same time, they reveal that this discipline, which could be said to pursue the perception, critical reflection and shaping of processes of religious education (religiöse Bildung), is a compound science that treats its subjects on the basis of insights and approaches from many other disciplines such as education science, psychology, sociology, systematic theology, history and law. From this perspective, religious education constitute an interdisciplinary challenge.

Such questions from the field of the theory of science itself formed the backdrop for the found-
ing of the interdisciplinary and interfaculty ZRB at the University of Jena in 2011, with the objective of “supporting, fostering and conducting academic research analysing processes of religious education” (§ 2.1 of the ZRB’s Statutes). As of September 2015, the Centre counts 19 regular members from four different faculties of the University of Jena, associate members from twelve different universities, institutional cooperation partners such as the Georg Eckert Institute, the Territorial Church Archive at Eisenach or the Thuringia University and Federal State Library, as well as an international advisory board. The board of directors is especially indicative of the interfaculty nature of the ZRB, with Prof. Dr Michael Wermke (Director, Chair of Religious Education, University of Jena), Prof. Dr Gisela Mettele (Deputy Director, Chair of Gender History, University of Jena) and Prof. Dr Ralf Koerrenz (Deputy Director, Chair of Historical Pedagogy and Education Research, University of Jena). The work of the ZRB is supported by third-party funding such as the German Research Association (DFG), the German Foundation for Peace Research (Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung), the Ernst Abbe Foundation, the Protestant Church of Germany or the Protestant Church of Central Germany.

With its existing structure, the ZRB provides a sturdy platform on which to address questions of religious education. The work of the Centre is reflected, for instance, in its dynamic culture of conferences and publications, of which only two book series shall be mentioned here. Both are published by the “Protestant Publishing House” (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, Leipzig) and closely connected with the ZRB: “Religious Education in Discourse” (Religiöse Bildung im Diskurs, RBD) and “Studies on Religious Education” (Studien zur Religiösen Bildung, StRB). Further areas of focus include the support of early-career scholars, public relations, collaborative work on curricula projects such as the “First 18 Years Thuringia Education Plan” (Thüringer Bildungsplan bis 18 Jahre) and the production and publishing of textbooks. Last but not least, we should also mention the ZRB’s digitisation project, “Church and School Journals of the Area of the Territorial Churches of Thuringia from the End of the 18th until the First Third of the 20th Century” (Kirchliches und schulisches Zeitschriftenwesen für den Bereich der Thüringer Landeskirchentümer vom Ende des 18. bis zum ersten Drittel des 20. Jahrhunderts), which digitises historical periodicals and renders them available for researchers on the Internet.

In the future, the ZRB will reorganise its work into four departments which will build upon existing areas of focus in our research: “Religious Education in the Context of Globalisation”, “Religious Education in the Context of Religious Studies at School and Religious Teacher Training”, “Religious Education in the Context of Secularisation and Religious Pluralisation” and “Religious Education in the Context of our Society of Decisions”. The ZRB thus seeks a clearer orientation towards current challenges of religious education in order to continue contributing to a contemporary religious education within the family, the school, the parish, the media and society as a whole.

In 2015, the GEI signed a memorandum of understanding with the ZRB to intensify the research cooperation and the exchange of ideas with regard to educational media and religion.