TEXTBOOKS
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR ALL
IN HAMBURG

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In Hamburg, for almost twenty years, there has been a considerable amount of activity in the production of teaching material suitable for religiously diverse school classes. The most recent is a very ambitious ten-volume series, *Interreligiös-dialogisch lernen von der Grundschule bis zur Sekundarstufe 1* (Interreligious and dialogic learning from primary school to lower secondary level). Symbols representing the major world religions are prominent on the front cover. From the number of authors involved in writing the series it is clear that consultation and consensus have been a feature of the production process. For example, volume five, *Für eine gerechte Welt – Prophetinnen, Propheten und wir* (Towards a Fair World – The Prophets and Us) lists 6 authors (Jochen Bauer, Mara Sommerhof, Rabeya Müller, Christian Pante- nius, Oliver Petersen, Amin Rochdi, 2014). The first page then lists a number of advisers, each with a different world religion in brackets after their name, for example, Judaism or Christianity. Doctoral and professorial titles illustrate the academic credentials of each individual. From their first names or surnames the reader might also infer that the specified religion is not only their academic specialisation, but also the faith community to which they belong. Also listed are three institutions: the Academy of World Religions at the University of Hamburg, the institute within the Hamburg education authority responsible for further teacher training, and the institute of the local Evangelical-Lutheran Church responsible for Religious Education in schools.

A closer look at the brief CVs on the back cover reveals that the book’s authors are either affiliated with these three or with similar institutions. It seems that the organisations behind the book are at pains to draw attention to the fact that not only have many people been involved in producing the series, but that there is significance in their roles.

An interesting mix of principle and pragmatism lies behind most efforts to produce textbooks on religion for schools. This is particularly noticeable in Germany where religion is the sole subject guaranteed by the constitution. According to article 7:3, while the state has the responsibility to ensure the infrastructure, content must be “according to the principles of the faith communities”. In the aftermath of the Second World War, when this clause was ratified, it seemed judicious to create a counterbalance to the state’s monopoly over values. And at that time there was a universal understanding that the “faith communities” referred to were the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Teacher training, syllabus construction, textbook approval, all would need to be hammered out in consensus between church and state. As the years went by, societal change began to disturb this arrangement: a rapid decline in church membership, and the increasing presence of additional faith communities. In Hamburg, by the mid nineteen eighties it had become clear that the high levels of religious diversity would make confessionally separated classrooms very difficult to organise. At the same time the possibility of interreligious dialogue as a teaching principle was gaining attention (cf. Doedens & Weiße 1997) and resulted in a model known as “Religionsunterricht für alle” (Religious Education for All). The curriculum was interreligious and the pupils diverse, but the teachers were still Evangelical-Lutheran.
paradox began to ease significantly in 2014, with a series of concordats between the city of Hamburg and faith communities, beginning with the Muslim and the Alevite communities (cf. Bauer 2014). “Religious Education for All” now needed to be planned in consultation with a growing number of faith communities. A determined process of textbook writing has accompanied this development.

If we return to question of roles in the current textbook production exercise, it is interesting to observe that the contributors frequently have more than one role. Thus someone may be responsible for further teacher education and at the same time be a member of the church, or be both a university professor and a practicing Muslim. Having addressed dialogue between state and faith communities in such practical way, the emphasis can then be upon interreligious co-operation. Some interpreters of the constitution maintain that textbooks require official approval by the faith communities. The city-state of Hamburg has traditionally maintained a much broader understanding of the relationship, which shifts the locus of authority to those professionally best suited for the task. For the past twenty years, the curriculum has been developed by a network of individuals from various faith communities, engaged not as official representatives but as interested parties and experts in the field. In spite of this, the changed situation requires some recognition of constitutional expectations, as is evident in the way authorship is addressed. These publications have achieved an elegant resolution to the question of diversity within faith communities. For example, section headings can be entitled “A Christian perspective of … ”, or “A Jewish perspective of … “. This technique serves as an invitation to enter the dialogue. Drawing attention, as they do, to the cooperative process of production, these books present the ideal of what is possible in the classroom.

Even so, the last word has not been spoken on any of these issues. There is much to be said for the pressure on educational authorities and faith communities to cooperate, but the reality is that there are many pupils and parents without a formal affiliation to religious organisations. Expanded networks of expertise would offer a means of retaining what is important in the current practice. Teachers are increasingly turning to easily accessible online resources, sometimes of dubious quality. And the role of the textbook, as a work of recognised expertise and product of consultation, remains a vital one.

REFERENCES