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Travelling religion: dynamic processes of Orthodox religious education in Germany

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ABSTRACT

The Orthodox Church in Germany is characterised by its diaspora situation. Most of the Orthodox Christians are related with at least one other country from Eastern, South-Eastern Europe or the Middle East. This constellation has an impact on Orthodox religious education historically as well as in terms of structure and religious pedagogics. Beyond national backgrounds the curricula consider cultural diversity and a formation of an Eastern identity of a Western Orthodoxy in a fruitful dialogue with the concrete local surrounding. At the same time, it corresponds to the religious education models prescribed by the German federal states, which includes denominational religious education and expectantly forms of denominational cooperation. Orthodox religious education in Germany is characterised by a dynamic process that aims to the Orthodox identity, the contextual surroundings and current challenges.

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Introduction

The establishment of Orthodox religious education is linked to the self-image, the presence and history of Orthodox Christians and Church in Germany, the development of their local church structures and the need for religious education for Orthodox pupils at public schools. With regard to the self-image of the Orthodox Church, it must be said that in its ecclesiological and sacramental sense the Orthodox Church is worldwide *one* church. At the same time, it administrates itself autocephalous, i.e. independent by an archbishop or patriarch and a synod responsible for a concrete territory, in the various traditionally Orthodox countries or larger regions. All local churches are united in the same faith, liturgy and canon law, while the language used in the church, customs and mentality may differ. As the Orthodox Christians and parishes in the German diaspora have a history of migration, the geographical and cultural diversity described above is part of their biography in addition to unity in faith. This also applies to the church structures, which have only emerged over time. While the individual Orthodox dioceses for Germany usually have ties to their countries or regions of origin, they are interconnected within the Orthodox Bishops' Conference in Germany (OBKD), founded in 2010, acting jointly in several areas of Orthodox religious education.

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The challenge in establishing and developing Orthodox religious education was, and is, to remain authentic and to act appropriate to the local circumstances at the same time, which can be seen in the development of various pedagogical paradigms during the history.

The present article shows the history and current status of Orthodox religious education as a form of minority religious education within the German context. First, the framework conditions of religious education in Germany and its various models are outlined. Then an overview of the history of Orthodox religious education is given, followed by a discussion of the associated paradigms. Central stages of Orthodox religious education are shown, its connection to home countries, but also the meaning of the globally unifying faith, its contribution to integration in Germany and to the German religious education landscape. Finally, the concluding statements are summarised and a brief outlook for the future development of Orthodox religious education in Germany is given.

Religious education at public schools in Germany

Religious education according to the basic law

Germany seems to be one of the most privileged countries in Europe, and possibly worldwide, with regard to religious education at public schools. According to the German Basic Law (Grundgesetz/GG), religious education is guaranteed as a regular subject in public schools (Art. 7 Para. 3 GG). No other school subject enjoys such an explicit legal protection. This resulted from the appreciation of religion when the Basic Law was created after the Second World War. The right to freedom of religion (Art. 4 GG) includes both a negative and a positive guarantee by the state, i.e. on the one hand it is forbidden to prevent the free practise of religion, and on the other hand the free development of faith must be fostered (Robbers 2005, Nr. 124). The state is therefore obliged to create and maintain space and opportunities for the positive practise of faith (Robbers 2005, Nr. 124); these also include religious education.

Moreover, the experience of the totalitarian regime led to the awareness that the state needed an orientation on values outside itself in order to produce liberal values of a democracy (Böckenförde 1967, 63). The state needed religion without instrumentalising it or disposing of it and at the same time it was committed to religious and ideological neutrality. Therefore, religious education at public schools is a joint affair (res mixta) of state and religious communities. Religious education is taught in accordance with the principles of the respective religious communities (Art. 7 Para. 3 GG) and therefore basically a denominational religious education which the state supervises as a regular compulsory subject in schools (Art. 7 Para. 1 and 3 GG). However, due to the guaranteed freedom of religion (Art. 4 GG), it is possible to opt out of religious education (Art. 7 Para. 2 GG).

The Basic Law not only guarantees religious education as a regular subject, but it also provides cultural sovereignty (Kulturhoheit) of the German federal states in the education sector. The state supervision of the school system (Art. 7 Para. 1 GG) is carried out by the federal states (Art. 30 GG), which can be organised differently. There are also historical reasons for this regulation, which primarily aim to decentralise education; the realisation of a nationwide equivalent to the German Empire Education Act (Reichsschulgesetz) as it was prepared by the Weimar Republic is almost excluded by the Basic Law (Meyer-Blanck 2014, 145). However, religious education is restricted by

the so-called Bremer Klausel (Art. 141 GG). Accordingly, Art. 7 Para. 3 GG which guarantees religious education as a regular subject does not apply in those federal states in which a different state law regulation existed on 1 January 1949.

Models of religious education in the German federal states

In 12 of the 16 federal states in Germany, religious education is provided in accordance with Art. 7 Para. 3 of the Basic Law. In these 12 federal states the subject is regarded as denominational religious education at public schools. In the event a student wishes to opt out of religious education, an alternative subject like philosophy or ethics is usually offered. In the other 4 federal states (Hamburg, Bremen, Berlin, Brandenburg) the models of religious education differ (for further details see Meyer-Blanck 2014, 145–157).

In theory, regular denominational religious education is open to all religious communities, which decide whether the content of religious education is in line with their religious principles; in the case of the churches, the local dioceses are the relevant cooperation partners of the respective federal state.[1] For the most part, Roman Catholic and Protestant religious education is structurally well established due to historical reasons and state-church agreements. There is also religious education of numerically smaller churches and religious communities in Germany, such as Orthodox, Jewish and Islamic religious education. However, the latter are in no way comparable to the Catholic and Protestant religious education. The Protestant and Catholic churches are the two largest churches in Germany, even though their members make up less than 50% of Germany's population as of 2022 (Kirchenamt der EKD 2023, 8). They were probably also the only churches that the authors of the Basic Law had in mind. At that time, they were also more strongly represented in society in percentage terms.

Social changes and denominational cooperation of religious education

In fact, the declining numbers of members of Catholic and Protestant churches in recent decades and the increase in religious and ideological plurality of the society have led to changes in denominational Catholic and Protestant religious education. Their religious education classes became either smaller or more diverse. For this reason, there is a denominational cooperation between the Catholic and Protestant churches in several federal states (Lower Saxony, Baden-Wuerttemberg, North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse). Equivalent cooperation with the Orthodox Church has not yet taken place, although the need is already indicated by the fact that many Orthodox pupils participate in religious education of other denominations, according to a statement from the OBKD (OBKD 2017). According to declarations by the Roman Catholic German Bishops' Conference in Germany (DBK) and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the term 'denominational cooperation' can be defined as

> the legally and organisationally regulated, theologically and didactically reflected, temporary or permanent joint teaching of pupils of different denominations by teachers of different denominations, who can and should gain added didactic value from this interdenominational cooperation. (Schröder and Woppowa 2021, 6; see also Kirchenamt der EKD 1994, 5.1, 5.2; Sekretariat der DBK 2016, 18, 36–37)

According to the official regulations of both cooperating churches, these classes of religious education remain denominational in terms of the Basic Law, whereby the denominationality of the subject is usually determined by the denomination of the respective teacher (Kirchenamt der EKD 2018, 6; Sekretariat der DBK 2016, 36). According to the mentioned declarations of the two churches, the exact form of the involvement of teachers can be customised to local situations and range from team teaching, regular rotation between teachers of different denominations, occasional invitation of teachers of other denominations, or teaching by a teacher on the basis of an internal religious education curriculum agreed by the religious education teachers' conference (Fachkonferenz) of the respective school (Kirchenamt der EKD 1994, 5.2; Sekretariat der DBK 2016, 33). The specific organisation of denominational cooperative religious education can vary greatly due to different models depending on the local situation in the respective federal state (see in detail Schröder and Woppowa 2021, 5–15).

The longstanding cooperation and the established tradition of denominational-cooperative religious education in the federal state Lower Saxony have led to new extensions. The Protestant churches and Catholic dioceses in Lower Saxony have initiated a process for further development of the denominational and denominational-cooperative religious education into jointly responsible Christian religious education which is going to be implanted in 2025 (https://www.religionsunterricht-in-niedersachsen.de/christlicherRU). Although the official cooperation partners were initially only Protestant and Catholic, the very name of the subject claims to be an all-Christian religious education. The OBKD has expressed its favour and support for Christian religious education, which includes its participation in this process of the implantation and arrangement of this subject (OBKD 2023).

History of Orthodox religious education in Germany

Orthodox religious education in Germany has a relatively young history compared to Catholic and Protestant religious education, which is linked to the history of the Orthodox Church in the country and to a certain extent reflects it. In the following, central stages of Orthodox religious education and its respective paradigms are presented, which are relevant for understanding its current situation and its further development.

Russian Orthodox religious education in the federal state Bavaria after the Second World War

The beginnings of Orthodox religious education in Germany are part of the post-war era. Once the Second World War (1939) began, many Orthodox Christians were among the forced labourers in Germany who came from Eastern and Southeastern Europe, as well as from Western European countries (Miron 2008, 179). Additionally, a large proportion of the prisoners of war and refugees who came to the Allied occupation zones after the end of the Second World War (1945) were Orthodox Christians. Most of these approx. 10.8 million so-called displaced persons (Jacobmeyer 1985, 42) returned home or emigrated to another country soon after

the war, but those who could not be repatriated were brought together in camps (Müller 1995, 101).

There were around 1.2 million displaced persons living in the three western occupation zones shortly after the end of the Second World War (Müller 1995, 101). Among the large number of Orthodox Christians and priests of various nationalities, 16 bishops and more than 300 priests of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) lived there temporarily (Seide 2001, 122–123). Within a short period of time, parishes were founded in the camps, as well as schools with a non-German language of instruction, to enable the children to continue their education which had been interrupted by their emigration (133). The diocese of the ROCOR, which had just moved its headquarters from Berlin to Munich, supported the organisation of Russian-speaking schools (133). Until the mid-1950s, there were three Russian-speaking secondary and parochial schools in Munich with Orthodox religious education as subject. The religious education provided by the diocese of the ROCOR was recognised as a regular subject in the federal state Bavaria in 1956 by a letter from the Minister of Culture.[2] Even if the number of Orthodox pupils subsequently declined, the religious education was supported by the Free State of Bavaria (Kiroudi 2021a, 97). The promotion of religious freedom and the distancing from any totalitarian ideology of that time was a priority for the state authorities.

(Greek-)Orthodox Religious Education starting in the 1980s/1990s

Most of the Displaced Persons moved to other countries soon after the Second World War; consequently, the subsequent presence of Orthodox Christians in Germany was very limited. This changed with the recruitment agreements between the Federal Republic of Germany and Greece (1960) and the former Yugoslavia (1968) which – unexpected and unplanned, as so often in history – was also a turning point for Orthodox religious education in Germany. A large proportion of the migrant workers were Orthodox Christians. Many of their families moved to Germany, or they started families in Germany, meaning that a large number of school-age children from the recruitment countries were then attending public schools in Germany. Initially, German education policy assumed that their stay would be only temporary and that the pupils concerned would return to their countries of origin. In the 1980s, however, the reality was different and the question of educational measures for permanent residence in Germany became topical. In various federal states, the question of religious education for Orthodox pupils at school was raised. Orthodox children and youngsters were to be given access to the educational opportunities offered by the German school system (Langenfeld 2001, 34).

Accordingly, conversations on the introduction of Orthodox religious education were initiated within several of the federal states in the early 1980s, where numerous Orthodox Christians lived. The Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Germany was the cooperation partner for state authorities within the meaning of the Basic Law, as it was the only major and freely operating Orthodox public corporation in Germany at that time (Thon 2000, 404). Until 1994, the religious education of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Germany was introduced as a regular subject in all four of the federal states, North Rhine-Westphalia, Bavaria, Hesse and Lower Saxony; only in Baden-Wuerttemberg the Orthodox religious education was established later, in 2016.

Implementing Orthodox religious education has required minimum numbers of Orthodox pupils, defined by the federal states (see in detail Kiroudi 2021a, 32), in one class and for religious education teachers to be Orthodox. Neither of these has been readily available in regular classes in public schools. In order to find a fast solution, in the federal State North Rhine-Westphalia the possibility was opened up to teach Orthodox religious education as part of Greek mother-tongue classes (Muttersprachlicher (Ergänzungs-)Unterricht) (KM NRW 1985, 468), which were maintained by the federal State itself (1985–2009). In addition to language lessons, these classes included knowledge of the history and culture of the country. It was not an ideal solution, as the genuine place of religious education is the regular school programme. However, it has given many Orthodox children access to religious education of their denomination as about 91,3% of the Greek population is Orthodox (SMRE 2018, 59).

Even if the focus was on pupils with a Greek background, particularly in North Rhine-Westphalia, non-Greek children also took part in the classes, for instance in the federal state Bavaria, depending on local circumstances and opportunities. Also according the curricula, the designation of their religious education as 'Greek Orthodox' is not to be understood in the national, but in the cultural meaning (KM NRW 1994, 21). The term 'Greek Orthodox' can even be found in the early school reports of the Russian schools described above as a denominational designation for religious education (Kiroudi 2021a, 51). Similarly, the term 'Roman Catholic' is understood as a cultural and not a geographical term. However, since the term was not readily understood in its universal meaning by non-specialists, the subject was officially designated 'Orthodox'.

Social changes and new structures after the 1990s to the present

The way was paved for everything that followed in the 1990s after the end of the Soviet Union and the political turnaround in communist and socialist states, when a large number of Orthodox Christians from various countries in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe came to Germany. Orthodox pupils became more culturally diverse, e.g. with Greek, Arabic, Russian, Ukrainian, Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Georgian and sometimes German backgrounds. Their religious education and upbringing in schools was a common concern of the canonical Orthodox dioceses, which came together in 1994 to form the 'Commission of the Orthodox Church in Germany' (KOKiD). KOKiD became the cooperation partner for state authorities in the various federal states. Greek Orthodox religious education was not only open to all Orthodox pupils in terms of its self-image, but also formally, and could also be taught by teachers from all canonical Orthodox dioceses. In 2010, the competencies of the KOKiD were taken over by the OBKD, which was founded as the successor organisation.

The common responsibility of the Orthodox dioceses for religious education is also becoming increasingly significant with regard to the continuing migration of Orthodox Christians from various countries. Major migration flows over the last thirty years have included Serbian refugees during the Yugoslav wars (1991–1994), economic migrants from Greece since the financial crisis in the country (2010 and even earlier), refugees from the Middle East since the civil war in Syria (2011) and from Ukraine since the Russian-Ukrainian war (2022). According to estimates in May 2022, there were around three million Orthodox Christians living in Germany (Thon, 2022, IV), without

considering the number of immigrants from Ukraine in the last two years. According to the Central Register of Foreigners (AZR) as of March 2024 there are 350,135 children and young people under the age of 18 in Germany who are registered as war refugees from Ukraine in Germany (Mediendienst Integration 2024)[3]; whilst 62,7% of the Ukrainian population are Orthodox (Razumkov Centre 2022, 24). Overall, the number of Orthodox Christians in Germany is increasing.

Paradigms of Orthodox religious education

Beyond the self-understanding of the Orthodox Church and theology, the paradigms of Orthodox religious education are shaped by the socio-cultural background of the religious communities and the circumstances of place and the time, by the general conditions and requirements of the respective federal states and by the current discourse on religious education as a whole on site. In the following, the development of central paradigms and paradigm shifts of Orthodox religious education and their current development are depicted.

Religious education of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) in the federal state Bavaria and orientation on national paradigms

With regard to cooperation between church and state on religious education, until today, law of the federal state Bavaria has granted religious communities a relatively high degree of autonomy compared to other federal states. The development of curricula for religious education is mainly the responsibility of the religious communities. At the same time, state approval is required, as religious education must meet the educational standards of a school subject. Religious communities, the Catholic and Protestant churches in particular, lastly also the Orthodox church, currently work together with the State Institute for School Quality and Educational Research in Munich to develop religious curricula. However, in the post-war period, the catechisms of the respective churches served as curriculum orientation or curricula itself (Kiroudi 2021a, 72). Religious education organised by religious communities outside the regular school programme can be recognised as a regular subject in public schools, as far as the state-approved curricula are used. This regulation is still valid today (StMUK 2023, 14–19), even if the genuine place of religious education at public schools are the schools itself, where Catholic and Protestant religious education takes place in any case, as well as the religious education of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis. It enables smaller religious communities to organise the minimum number of pupils required for religious education, which is usually not given to a school class, outside of the regular school programme.

This legal framework benefited the ROCOR to organise and shape its religious education according to its own profile and possibilities. Preserving and communicating the values negated by the Soviet Union, which included the Orthodox faith and the Russian homeland and culture, was in a sense part of ROCOR's raison d'être (Seide 2001, 133.135). According to a conference of primary and secondary school teachers in the US zone held in Munich in May 1946, 'love of the homeland and national dignity' should be the guiding principles for the entire teaching programme in Russian schools; children were to be taught the language, history, literature and culture of their homeland on the

basis of Russian national culture (134–135). In the early post-war period, religious education in the German diocese of the ROCOR was called in Russian 'Zakon Božij' ('Law of God') in reference to religious education in pre-revolutionary Russia. By 1956 at the latest, when these classes were recognised by the federal state Bavaria as a regular subject, the official German name was 'Russian Orthodox Religious Education' (and no longer 'Greek Orthodox'), expressing more clearly the Russian characteristics. The orientation towards pre-revolutionary Russia remained, as did the proximity to the Russian homeland and language, the parish as place for religious education and the addition of Russian leisure activities (Kiroudi 2021a, 60).

Cooperation with the KOKiD resulted in the implementation of a formal change in 2009. A common curriculum for religious education was adopted, receiving support from all Orthodox dioceses. This was the state-approved curriculum for Russian Orthodox religious education, which then applied to Orthodox religious education throughout the federal state Bavaria; Russian peculiarities were renounced in favour of the common cause. Since 2010, Orthodox religious education in Bavaria, as in the other federal states, remains the responsibility of the OBKD where the bishops of the ROCOR have been members from the very beginning (Kiroudi 2021a, 61; Artemoff 2016, 43).

Even when the membership of the dioceses of the Moscow Patriarchate in the OBKD was dormant to a certain extent due to ecclesiastical conflicts in Ukraine,[4] they continued to bear responsibility for Orthodox religious education in Germany, both in terms of persons and content. On the one hand, the bishops of all Orthodox dioceses, including those of the Moscow Patriarchate, are jointly responsible for Orthodox religious education. Likewise, teachers and students from all dioceses are still involved in Orthodox religious education. Academics from the Moscow Patriarchate are also full members of commissions for religious education. Additionally, the only employee paid by the OBKD to coordinate religious education in North Rhine-Westphalia belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate.

As far as the curricula are concerned, only the curricula that are jointly supported by all the dioceses represented in the OBKD apply. The pre-existing classes in the premises of ROCOR have been retained only to ensure the continuation of Orthodox religious education classes. When setting up new classes, care is taken to ensure they are at least integrated into the regular classrooms of schools, even if the lessons often can only take place outside the regular school programme (Kiroudi 2021a, 90).

(Greek-)Orthodox Religious education connecting global and local dimensions towards integration

The beginnings of the (Greek-)Orthodox religious education were at a time when the German education system was well established. Around a third of all Orthodox Christians in Germany still live in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia. This industrial region welcomed a significantly higher population of Orthodox Christians due to its abundant opportunities for viable employment compared to other German federal states. To a certain extent, the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia took the lead in the development of curricula, namely the legal framework of the federal states, which made it possible for the North Rhine-Westphalian curricula to be largely adopted in the federal states of Lower Saxony and Hesse. The Bavarian curricula had to meet the

pedagogical paradigms of the Free State of Bavaria, which is why separate curricula were developed there. However, the curricula were developed in close cooperation with the federal state North Rhine-Westphalia, so that congruence could be established in terms of religious education paradigm and content (Kiroudi 2021a, 82).

The diaspora situation of the Orthodox Church and its believers continues to have meaning within the context of Orthodox religious education. Diaspora means on the one hand, being a religious minority in a society with other beliefs and world views and, on the other hand, being related to the nationality, language, culture and religion of another country due to one's own migration biography. The reference to religion can be more at home in the language and the tradition of the country of origin, which is mainly used in Orthodox parishes, even if knowledge of this language is very limited and the ability to express oneself in German is more widespread in everyday life. The language of origin, the way of thinking, and the content it conveys, have their own value (Nikolaou 1990, 220–226) which is recognised and appreciated (KM NRW 2012, 8, 22).

However, Greek Orthodox religious education is not exclusively about personal affiliation, and the authenticity of faith in relation to one's country of origin, distant from one's place of residence. Therefore, the religious didactic concept of this subject was not based on religious education models from Greece, which spoke the language of a different socio-cultural context and education system. Rather, the focus is on the theological understanding of what it means to be 'Greek', not in a manner of nationalism, but rather a cultural meaning with an ecumenical dimension, i.e. the Orthodox faith unfolds worldwide among different nations. From the outset, this is probably the biggest difference in the religious didactic concept of Greek Orthodox religious education in comparison to Russian Orthodox religious education.

The shaping of a 'Western Orthodoxy with an Eastern identity'[5] has been a significant orientation for Greek Orthodox religious education (Kallis 1999, 516; Papakonstantinou 1998, 199). Behind this term lies the self-image of the Orthodox witness in the diaspora, its integration into German society and its ability to engage in dialogue amidst a denominationally pluralistic landscape (Kallis 1999, 513–516; 2003, 16). It is precisely about not creating a 'colonial ghetto of the respective church of origin', for 'as important as being rooted in history is for the identity of Orthodoxy, it proves to be dangerous if it leads to an inability to perceive the reality of the present' (Kallis 1999, 514). Rather, the 'Pauline principle of inculturation' must also be implemented in the diaspora, 'so that the integration of Orthodoxy into new cultural and social areas becomes possible' (Kallis 1999, 515). However, the cooperation of all Orthodox dioceses in the diaspora is required, which in this context must take precedence over their mother churches (Kallis 1999, 515–516).

Of course, this is not just about structures, but about authenticity and the living reality of faith on the ground. The holistic dimension of faith and its essential content remains worldwide, while simultaneously it is unfolding under the specific conditions present in Germany (KM NRW 2012, 9). The different migration backgrounds of the pupils make visible how the diverse life of faith is shaped by language and customs in different places, but also how the power of faith and liturgy is globally unifying.[6] It seems that this is a foundation on which Orthodoxy can build on German soil.

One of the aims of Orthodox religious education is to encourage and enable pupils to develop their own religious identity (StMUK 1999, 2), as well as to enable them to

participate in, and to shape, the political, cultural and religious life of the democratic society in Germany (KM NRW 2012, 9). This is where the mission of the church and the educational aims of the state come together (Kiroudi 2021a, 36–45, 159–166). On the one hand 'every person shall have the right for free development of his personality' (Art. 2 Para. 1 GG), which includes religious freedom and has a social dimension; on the other hand, a free society is dependant on the free development of its members' personalities (Langenfeld 2001, 219). From an educational point of view, the development of a free personality includes an educational process (Meyer-Blanck 2014, 147). The free development of personality does not take place in an isolated vacuum, but amidst the life of a pluralistic society, which is also reflected in schools. In this context, the capacity for dialogue as a free person becomes increasingly important.

As part of the denominational Orthodox religious education, a reflected personal point of view is understood as a relevant principle for dialogue, whereby the awareness of one's own faith takes place – among others – in dealing with other denominations, religions and worldviews (StMUK 1999, 2; KM BW 2019, 9.15). At the same time, an appropriate appreciation of each other's position and mutual understanding are to be promoted (KM NRW 2012, 11; KM BW, 9). Both dimensions, identity and dialogue, reflection on one's own religious standpoint and respect for other religious positions, are not only intended within Orthodox religious education, but also as an opportunity for cooperation with religious education of other Christian denominations (KM NRW 2012, 11). Cooperation between the denominations – while retaining denominational subjects – can also provide religious impulses for the organisation of the school as a whole (KM NRW 2012, 11), which itself is a mirror of society.

Need and chances of denominational cooperation

Although Orthodox religious education has been introduced as a regular subject in five federal states, less than 1% of Orthodox pupils take part in it. The reason for this is that the federal states respectively stipulate a minimum number of pupils from 5 to 12, which is not readily available in every single class or at every school (Kiroudi 2021a, 128). Therefore, lessons have to take place across classes and schools, usually outside the regular school programme and often in the afternoon. This additional workload turns out to be challenging for pupils, their parents, and teachers. This leads to a very limited offer of Orthodox religious education in real school life (329). However, due to the extremely limited establishment of Orthodox religious education, most Orthodox pupils either attend an alternative subject, religious education of another denomination, or denominational-cooperative religious education. In this way, they have long been part of the lively discourse of denominational-cooperative religious education, even if the Orthodox Church is not yet an official cooperation partner.

The fact that Orthodox religious education has not yet been included in denominational cooperation has historical reasons which can initially be summarised under the term of non-simultaneity (Kiroudi 2023, 195–197). In the 1990s, the Orthodox Church focused on the cooperation of the Orthodox Dioceses and the establishment of Orthodox religious education. At the same time, church membership in the Protestant and Catholic churches declined. Since then, the classes of the Protestant and Catholic Religious Education, which had been already established, have become increasingly heterogeneous,

including pupils of other denominations, or those without religious affiliations. Informal bilateral Protestant-Catholic cooperation has developed, that later led to the formal establishment of this cooperation. In 2017, the OBKD indicated its general willingness to denominational cooperation (OBKD 2017) and in 2023 expressly spoke in favour of its participation in Christian religious education, considering itself responsible for the subject at all levels and for making a significant contribution to the religious education of Orthodox pupils (OBKD 2023). The OBKD and the EKD issued an encouraging statement on cooperation in a joint publication in 2024 (OBKD and EKD 2024).

The statements up to now on denominational cooperation with Orthodox religious education reveal both needs and opportunities. The greatest need, and at the same time, opportunity, for such cooperation is to involve competence of an Orthodox perspective to denominationally mixed classes in favour of difference-sensitive learning (Kiroudi 2023, 198). Orthodox pupils are entitled to denomination-sensitive religious education (OBKD and EKD 2024, 29). Therefore, there is a need to feel 'represented in terms of content, a sense of belonging and an atmosphere of well-being' (OBKD 2023) in religious education classes of other denominations or denominational cooperative classes. Religious education teachers must be 'mindful of experiences of foreignness and difference among Orthodox children and young people, without reproducing such experiences in the form of othering' (OBKD and EKD 2024, 29). Due to the diaspora situation of Orthodox religious education, the heterogeneous classes can benefit from its experience in dealing with heterogeneity and the reflective processes on this (OBKD 2023). However, one of the needs is the inclusion of the topics of the various Christian denominations and their perspectives as an explicit topic in the curricula (OBKD 2024, 29) and teaching materials. Above all, there is a need for adequate religious education training and continuing education (OBKD and EKD 2024, 29), as there has been minimal Orthodox participation thus far.

It seems that many aspects of cooperation stand and fall with the structurally unequal situation of Orthodox religious education, and the Orthodox Church, in comparison to Protestant and Catholic religious education. The Orthodox Church must therefore be involved on an equal footing with the other church cooperation partners (Kiroudi 2021b, IV) at all levels so that mutual expertise proves to be an opportunity for religious education itself. The mutual expertise is in areas such as curriculum and textbook development, joint statements on religious education, higher education teaching, academic cooperation in the form of conferences and publications, as well as further scientific contributions (Kiroudi 2023, 188; OBKD 2023; OBKD and EKD 2024, 29). This expertise has so far been reflected in selective initiatives. They need to be expanded so that they have a lasting effect and ultimately benefit the strengthening of the interdenominational skills of all Christian pupils (OBKD and EKD 2024, 29).

Conclusion

Orthodox religious education in Germany has a complex history in which it had to find its own way, focusing on the needs of the religious education of Orthodox children and youngsters, and providing significant contributions in areas of theology, faith, and life of the Orthodox Church. Living in a diaspora situation as a denominational minority with multinational backgrounds can make young people increasingly question their identity

(StMUK 1999, 2; Peschke 2009, 369–371; Vliagkoftis 2015, 27). This tension, along with the connection between the language and culture of the country of origin, and the integration and identity formation of the place of residence, can also be witnessed in the described history of Orthodox religious education in Germany, its didactic paradigms, and its development in the educational system of the various federal states of Germany.

To summarise, the history of Orthodox religious education is characterised by three central paradigms. The first was the introduction of ROCOR religious education as a regular subject in the state of Bavaria after the Second World War. The profile of this religious education reflects the profile of ROCOR. Preserving and communicating the values, faith, and culture of a Russian homeland that was virtually nonexistent after the Russian Revolution (in 1917) was, to a certain extent, part of ROCOR's raison d'être (Seide 2001, 133.135). In fact, there, a national-religious cultivation of tradition took centre stage. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, not only did this form of justification for existence of ROCOR change, but the previously interrupted canonical communion with the other Orthodox autocephalous churches was also resumed.[7] This was also evident in the cooperation on Orthodox religious education within the OBKD.

The second stage and paradigm is the development of Greek Orthodox religious education in several federal states, which became most widespread in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia from 1985. Its establishment in mother-tongue lessons had practical reasons and was not ideological in nature. An 'Eastern identity of a Western Orthodoxy' has been the main didactic orientation. The focus was therefore on the understanding of the Orthodox Church as a world church that unites peoples, on developing religious communication competences, and on fostering integration and identity formation in the specific social context of Germany. As the geographical and cultural background of Orthodox Christians became increasingly diverse, this paradigm made it possible to organise Orthodox religious education in joint responsibility with all Orthodox dioceses and to make it accessible to all Orthodox pupils. This form of Orthodox religious education does not negate the different geographical and cultural backgrounds, but rather, draws upon the language and culture in which the pupils' faith is rooted in order to utilise language skills for the teaching of religious content (Kiroudi 2023, 186, 190–192).

Currently, the development of the third paradigm seems to have begun. The OBKD has already signalled an opening for denominational cooperation in religious education (OBKD 2017, 2023). The topic is increasingly being addressed, and not only within the OBKD. Also, and above all, at an academic level,[8] the question is being processed of how identity formation can be didactically reflected in denominational cooperation against the background of the diaspora experience, integration and dialogue, and central issues of life and faith (for more details see Kiroudi 2023, 194–198). The future will show to what extent the inclusion of the special features of Orthodox religious education, in the various models of cooperation, within the different federal states, can foster fruitful cooperation in the field of religious education. There is hope that the way will be paved for young people, to shape their present and future in Germany, as bridge builders between churches, cultures, and nations.

Notes

1. The religious community must have a representative authority and organisational structure that 'includes the power to make legally binding declarations in the name of the community and the powers arising from Art. 7 Para. 3 GG' (Link 1995, 501). The structures can vary depending on the religious community. Even if the status of a public corporation (Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts) is not mandatory, the organisational structures and prerequisites for cooperation are in place (Link 1995, 500).
2. Bescheid über die Anerkennung des durch die Orthodoxe Kirche erteilten Religionsunterrichts als ordentliches Lehrfach in Bayern, München, 02.06.1956, Nr. IV 93,173 (see Kiroudi 2021a, 59, 338).
3. A total of 1.42 million children and young people under the age of 18 have been displaced in Ukraine (IOM 2023).
4. In its capacity as the mother church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople granted autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine in 2018. Since then, the Moscow Patriarchate, which considers Ukraine to be its jurisdiction, has unilaterally interrupted Eucharistic communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and prohibited cooperation in bodies chaired by representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.
5. It is not a religious education principle per se, but a theological principle that has been adopted as an orientation for Orthodox religious education. This principle comes from Anastasios Kallis, Professor at the Chair of Orthodox Theology at the University of Münster (1979–1999). He was also a theological advisor in the development of curricula for Orthodox religious education, primarily in North Rhine-Westphalia, but also in Bavaria in 1998.
6. Characteristically, the Orthodox textbook for primary schools 'Mit Christus unterwegs' ('On the road with Christ') incorporates the background of Orthodox pupils through identification figures (see Keller 2016, 2–7), which guide users through the entire textbook. Theological content and examples of lived faith practise are included both in geographical and cultural diversity as well as in terms of communication skills in the German context (for the didactic concept of the textbook, see Kiroudi 2022, 179–182).
7. After the October Revolution (in 1917), the Russian parishes split into various jurisdictions. One of these was the ROCOR, which from 1923 to 2007 was de facto outside communion with (most) canonical Orthodox churches (Gaede 1985, 93; Stricker 2008, 101–104).
8. The Association of Orthodox theologians in German-speaking countries (Arbeitskreis Orthodoxer Theologinnen und Theologen im deutschsprachigen Raum) organised a conference on this topic in 2023 under the title 'Religious Education in the Diaspora. Orthodox religious education and denominational cooperation'. The publication of the conference proceedings with extended contributions is planned for 2025. https://akoth.de/orthodoxe-religioese-bildung-in-der-diaspora-konfessionelle-kooperation-trifft-den-nerv-der-zeit/.

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