

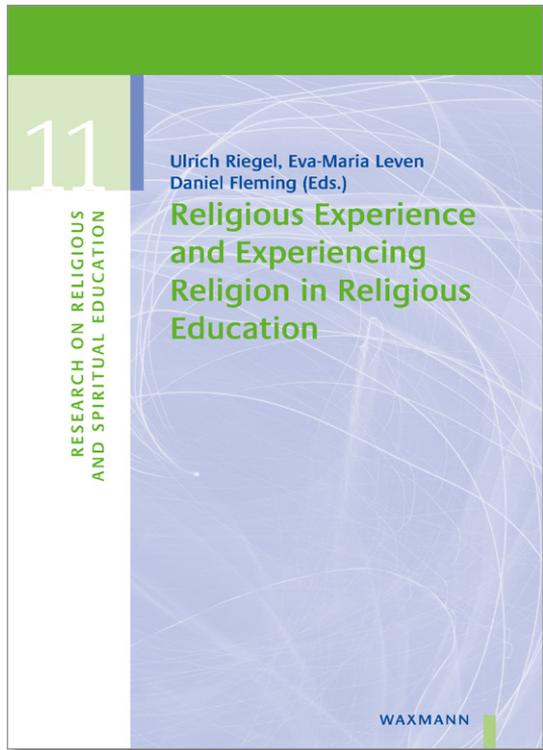
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# Teaching *Religion* and *Religious Experience* in Swiss Public Schools

## Conceptualizations, Didactical Strategies and Challenges

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# Sophia Bietenhard & Petra Bleisch

## **Teaching *Religion* and *Religious Experience* in Swiss Public Schools**

Conceptualizations, Didactical Strategies and Challenges

### **1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

According to the current curriculum for the public school<sup>2</sup> of the Canton of Berne, teaching topics on “religion” is part of the subject “General knowledge (Natur, Mensch, Mitwelt NMM)”, which also includes Social and Political studies, Science and Technology, Biology, Economics, Ecology, History, and Geography. This curriculum, introduced in 1995, will be replaced in 2018 by the new curriculum *Lehrplan 21* for all German-speaking parts of Switzerland from kindergarten to secondary school. In *Lehrplan 21*, the study about “religions and worldviews”, taught to all students independently from their convictions or faith affiliations, will form an area of competences, also integrated in the subject of “General Knowledge (*Natur, Mensch, Gesellschaft NMG*)” (D-EDK 2014; Helbling 2015; Bleisch 2015).

Teaching and learning in NMM and NMG is based on the cognitive-constructivist paradigm: Learning is considered to be more successful when students actively pursue their learning processes in highly authentic situations, by clarifying and broadening their own concepts and experiences in dialogue with others and through scientific methods (Müller & Adamina 2008; Möller 2008). Whereas experimenting or getting in touch with the “real thing” in Science classes is undisputedly at the core of successful learning processes, an action-oriented didactics becomes, however, more ambiguous or suspicious when dealing with matters of religion and worldviews in a non-denominational setting (Bleisch, Desponds, Durisch & Frank 2015). In order to respect the freedom of religion of the students, teachers should abstain from initiating any kind of religious practice (D-EDK 2014; Süess & Pahud de Mortanges 2015). Neither ought teachers enact “religious experiences” such as rituals, prayers or confessions. Nevertheless, many

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1 We thank the teachers for their cooperation and Dr Erich Blatter for his editing help.

2 In Switzerland, the term ‘public schools’ is used to refer to state-run schools.

schools hold dear to certain Christian-cultural traditions in the Advent, such as carol singing, recitals, and Christmas plays, often conducted in a near-by church. Schools tend to defend these traditions as an important and efficient means to create a sense of community as well as to convey an understanding for the prevailing culture in which all children live. It is important to note that parents can have their children dispensed from attending these gatherings as well as from rituals in the classroom, which they consider to be opposed to their religious views.

To put it straight, “teaching on the topic of religion/s” in Swiss public school is, at the same time, something ordinary and something special. On one hand, “religions” is to be considered as an ordinary topic taught to all students along with other topics in General Knowledge. On the other hand, “religions” as a topic is set apart due to constitutional law. Therefore, “religious experience” itself has become problematic in this specific Swiss school context. This context directed us to ask, how teachers would deal with the above-mentioned tensions, especially related to “religious experience”.

Building on some methodological considerations how “religious experience” in interviews can be explored, we will investigate the range of conceptualizations of “religious experience” the interviewed teachers put forward. We will argue that “religious experience” is an interesting category to describe a range of events occurring in school and connected to “religion”. However, “religious experience” turned out not to be fruitful as an analytical category to investigate the link to didactical strategies and challenges. Therefore, we will have recourse to the concept of “religion” in order to describe two modes of teaching “religion/s” in Swiss public schools.

## **2 Methodological Considerations and Sample Description**

Following Ann Taves (2009), we adopt an attributional approach to “religious experience” and “religion”. Accordingly, we investigate what experiences are deemed religious by the teachers. Furthermore, if regarded as an event (Asprem & Taves, 2016), “religious experience” is more likely accessible through narrations than through definitions. Therefore, our interview guide has been elaborated following Uwe Flick’s (2000; 2002) methodology of the episodic interview. Consequently, in the first part of the interview guide, a range of memories on episodes linked to “religious experiences” in school is prompted. In the second part, definitions of “religion” and “religious experience” have been asked. As we are primarily interested in concepts and strategies, data are analysed by use of coding techniques according to Corbin & Strauss (1990).

We conducted our interviews during spring and summer 2016.<sup>3</sup> Nine out of totally eleven teachers interviewed are employed as kindergarten- or primary-school

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3 All names have been anonymized.

teachers in the Canton of Berne, one works as a kindergarten-teacher in the Canton of Solothurn. One teacher is employed at a secondary school in the Canton of Berne.

Seven out of eleven teachers are aged between 50 and 65 years and have about 30 years of teaching experience. Another two teachers of the same age group have about 20 and 8 years of teaching experience respectively. Three teachers are aged between 35 and 40 with eight (two of them) and one (one of them) years of teaching experience. Their cultural and religious background is heterogeneous. Four teachers could be identified as “native Swiss” – with both parents born in Switzerland –, three persons migrated to Switzerland, two teachers grew up in migrant families, and two have one parent with a migrant background. One of the interviewees identifies as Alevi, one has grown up within a Muslim family but stopped identifying as Muslim in a stricter sense of the word, and nine teachers grew up in a Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or Evangelic family. Some of these persons converted to another Christian confession, mainly due to biographical incidences such as marriage or moving to a canton with a different predominant confession. All of them are interested in topics related to religion. Nine out of the eleven teachers describe their classes as being both religious and cultural diverse.

### **3 *Religious Experience: Teachers and the Classroom***

As mentioned above, the teachers were first asked to narrate episodes of “religious experience” linked to the classroom. Here, they were free to talk about their overall school experiences as well as to describe specific experiences when teaching religious topics. In a second step they were asked to define “religious experience”. We open this article with outlining their definitions in order to gain a typology of their conceptualizations of “religious experience”. Subsequently, we will compare and enrich them with the conceptualizations they use while narrating episodes in which, on one hand, they themselves or their students brought “religious experience” into the classroom, and, on the other hand, in which they narrate having intendedly or unintendedly evoked “religious experiences” during lessons.

#### **Teachers’ Definitions of *Religious Experience***

In their answers to the request to define “religious experience”, teachers have provided a broad variety of conceptualizations, which can be systemized in four distinct types. Most of the teachers describe more than one conceptualization but in most of the interviews, one is predominant.

(1) In a first conceptualization, “religious experience” is understood as the encounter of people, rituals or artefacts that are deemed religious (Taves 2009). An illustrating example is the definition given by Angela:

*“I associate religious experience with a lot of things, for example experiences with one’s own religion – be it an exchange with a priest or – I don’t know – a visit to the Vatican, listening to the Pope – I did that once –, buying a bible or being one offered, or being married in the church – experiences like these. But also religious experiences, for instance, when you meet a person and exchange ideas with people about religion such as in the Synagogue or Mosque or also with Jehovah’s Witnesses – or else – with people on the street who experience another religion, or to talk generally about religion. [...]”<sup>4</sup>*

In her explanation, “religious experiences” do not seem per se to be set apart. Instead, they are more accurately described as experiences of everyday practices (talking with people, buying a book) where the topic of discussion or the people, artefact, and ritual are identified as religious.

(2) In a second conceptualization, “religious experience” is intimately connected to the experience of a counterintuitive agency (Boyer 2001), which intervenes in one’s own life. As Lina narrates:

*“Religious experience – I don’t know – maybe everybody underwent that once in his/her way – for me, I made religious experiences and they were special to me. However they are not spectacular, not like burning bushes standing there. I have not walked on the sea, but things happened in my life where I exactly know that a power was involved, which I couldn’t have been deliberately caused. But I felt as if I was led through something, which couldn’t be explained, but it simply happened. And sometimes there are certain moments where I have the feeling that there is something watching over me – always without begging for it – I don’t have to beg, ‘please do this and that’ – that certain something is present and knows what I need, even before I get a chance to ask for it.”*

In Lina’s statement, the counterintuitive agency is not named but depicted as “something”. Other interviewees use expressions like “spiritual power”, “God”, believe in the agency of a Creator, or just allude that it cannot be by coincidence.

(3) In a third conceptualization, “religious experience” is characterized as an emotion. An illustrating example is Saro’s definition:

*“Religious experience can be when you admire things, when I observe a little beetle how it crawls, and my favourite animals are spiders, which is quite untypical, as so many people are afraid of them, but they are wonderful creatures. They have an awesome task, they have to look that we are not too much bitten by mosquitoes. As another religious experience I consider a wonderful sunrise or sunset – where I am overcome by this awesome feeling. Bach or a*

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4 In order to facilitate the reading of the cited interview passages, we edited them slightly.

*not too crazy Mozart, the Requiem, for example. There I say humankind [der Mensch] is just wonderful – why are humans able to do such great things? I am not talking about killing and terrorism – certain humans can do wonderful things and there must be divineness behind all that, which cannot be explained only by human intelligence. There is spirituality lying behind. Because intelligence never triggered warmth in my body, but when I – beautiful music, beautiful pictures or a beautiful atmosphere – if you allow it to arise, then every time I feel God. [...]*

In Saro's statement, the counterintuitive agent does not intervene directly in his life as in the conceptualization mentioned above, but causes emotions through nature or other talented people. Other interviewees understand "religious experience" as an emotion in the sense of being touched by the sermon in the funeral service for their father or by experiencing a basic feeling of trust, security and relief thanks to family upbringing or, as Monika puts it, "a kiss from God".

(4) A fourth conceptualization sees "religious experience" as empathy and, therefore, oriented towards other people. Gaye's definition exemplifies this as follows:

*"[...] and empathy – feeling suddenly that I feel empathy, which would be a religious experience for me, my definition as to say. [...]"*

The hesitation we perceived in many interviews, when the teachers responded to our request to define "religious experience", as well as the range of their answers while discussing religious topics lead us to the hypothesis that "religious experience" is not a concept teachers have thought about or are used to apply in their professional lives.

### **Teachers Deal with Their Own *Religious Experiences* in Classroom**

When we asked the teachers if they remember a situation in their classroom where their own religious experiences and attitudes interfered with their teachings, surprisingly, most of the teachers didn't refer directly to "religion" or "religious" in their answers. They state that by disclosing their own attitudes and values in their everyday actions, they follow common sense and humanistic teaching ideals.

One teacher, Thomas, goes a step further and explains his own experience of religion as a fundamental support in his life, which he deliberately brings into the classroom:

*"[...] I try to imbed the [Biblical] stories in everyday life – there will naturally emerge questions in the discussions – someone once said I don't believe in the idea that a God exists anyway, the world is a coincidence. Done! And there I have tried a little – to pick out what the student meant by this. I simply said, and I for myself believe that God exists, as far as I'm concerned, I am*

*glad that I'm not a coincidence and that there is something behind all that. The pencil isn't in use by coincidence either; and then I tried to show by means of concrete examples how I understand my concept and I tried to show that for me it is crucial that I'm not a coincidence, but that I have someone, and that I believe that I have been created, and this gives me value. However, I think there the break arrives too early for me, I don't know, I'm simply cautious. I don't want to tell a child you are wrong, I cannot say that either. Anyway, it is his belief or his view out there, in these situations I have the chance to state what it means to me, a basis to which I can seek refuge when I feel bad or when I'm sad. Yes, in the Jesus-stories of forgiveness – well, I can explode, that happens sometimes – then I can apologize and say I behaved wrongly. Anyway, somehow I hope that the students feel something: Ah, he does not just share some stories, but he tries to live according to them more or less. Here, one would have to ask the children.”*

As this example shows, a strong personal religious commitment may interfere in public school teaching, when challenged by students. Thomas is well aware that he is not entitled to change his student's convictions. Nevertheless, he struggles with himself that he cannot go any further. Monika, who is a member of the local parish council, solves this tension between authenticity and a neutral attitude in favour of authenticity. She argues that some of her students also see her in church when they attend activities there. Being a teacher with a long local presence, her church engagement is well known and, according to her professional understanding, she prefers being authentic and doesn't want to conceal it. At the same time she underlines her appreciation of the different backgrounds of her culturally very diverse students and their contributions in class. Slightly differently, Murat states that he, when asked, informs his students about his habit of sometimes eating pork, sometimes not, as this is part of his own beliefs. However, he adds that he would not respond to questions about his background in front of the class but during breaks and that he would always challenge the students to go and explore their own backgrounds and beliefs.

Other situations put forward by some of the teachers, where their own “religious experience” is interfering in their teaching are, when they have to deal with religiously justified norms, which oppose their own values. As Sandra narrates:

*“In fact that with the Free Evangelical church. There I cannot understand – that it can be so terrifying if a witch or a gnome appears in a story or the teaching material contains some gnomes. Or once acting was not possible, I think that was the evangelical Brüderverein [a conservative evangelical community] or not be allowed to join a camp. I once had students from Jehovah's Witnesses, and there I realized that they are not allowed to donate*

*blood – even in an emergency situation that one can survive. There, I realize that I come to my limits.”*

We may conclude that in the context of the question of how their own “religious experiences” interferes with their teachings, teachers tend to answer with a fifth type of conceptualization of “religious experience”: (5) It is understood as a moral and, in consequence, a pedagogical attitude. This can give way to personal tensions, but the teachers know they that have to deal with them on a professional level.

### **Students Bring Their *Religious Experience* into the Classroom**

In general, it is important to all teachers to create an atmosphere in their classroom, where students can share their everyday experiences and may ask questions without being laughed at. When invited to recall memories of their students bringing “religious experiences” into the classroom, the interviewed teachers answered with a broad range of experiences. Nevertheless, most of the narratives involve the “encounter of people, rituals and artefacts deemed religious” conceptualization, e.g. reports from Christian Sunday services, religious education or camps, a mother giving her child symbolically her daily blessing on the way to school; see someone praying; retellings what they had heard from other people about religion/s (mostly from their parents); and retellings of what they heard in the media (mostly about Islamism and Islamic terrorism). In some cases, students brought religious gifts with them. In other observations, children joked about religious customs, especially Ramadan.

Some teachers report that children ask questions or inform their peers about their religious ideas, imaginations, and norms. There, the core question for the students is the one about God’s existence. Religious norms are mentioned when students cannot take part in school activities and therefore abstain from joining their class community.

We can conclude, that generally, in such cases, teachers do not link “religious experience” to deep feelings, emotional arousal or intervening supernatural agencies when relating it to their students. As Thomas puts it: “Children narrate experiences with religion, not religious concernment (*Betroffenheit*).”

### ***Religious Experience* Occurring when Teaching**

When the teachers were asked, if they remember a situation in their classroom, where they have intentionally or unintentionally provoked “religious experiences”, nine of them explained that they are not allowed to deliberately provoke religious experiences in public school. Nevertheless, some of the teachers remembered specific incidences where students may have been “experiencing religion”.

To our surprise, the topic of “death” was evoked by six teachers as possible moments of induced religious experience in the classroom, either due to a specific

situation (e.g. death of a child's father) or to a philosophical discussion. Some of the teachers stated that, in such occasions, their students asked questions about religion and they shared religious ideas. One teacher recalled the sympathy expressed by her third graders when her father passed away. One of the kindergarten teachers observed her students playing "death and funeral" during the intervals of free play.

Here, we can describe a sixth conceptualization of "religious experience" (6). Even when "death" has not explicitly been linked to "religion", the answers mostly occurred immediately after the question of a possible emergence of "religious experience" in the classroom. Therefore, we conclude that for these teachers, "religious experience" is conceptualized as being confronted with one's own existence.

The other examples of answers to these questions conceptualize "religious experience" as an emotion. The first case is drawn from the interview of Erwin and it illustrates an example of non-intended "religious experience":

*"The [Muslim] boy was saying his prayer [during a school camp], unrolling his carpet in the room and the other boys were simply staying on their beds watching. And then, when I stepped into the room: Hush! [they told me], he is praying, and then the other boys really honoured him – or what should one call it? – yes, they simply admitted: Now he wants to pray and we keep quiet. I think that there happened something in this direction [of religious experience] and then also in the home of a Hindu student and her mother, who brought us closer their religion and explained why they live it like this. I think there emerged really a kind of an awe among the children."*

Erwin described the two encounters with religious practitioners as "fascinating" and "awe-inspiring" moments. When asked about a possible later use of these events in class, he denied it fervently and underlined that he kept his impressions for himself. However, later in the interview he interpreted the event as a successful outcome of his earlier teaching unit about religions. He witnessed that his students implemented the competences he had intended to build, like tolerance, respect, and mutual trust.

The second case, an illustration of a deliberately induced "religious experience", is drawn from the interview with Lina. She remembered an emotionally deeply touching event when chanting Christmas carols, among others "Stille Nacht" (silent night) during Advent. Not only did the students learn the song, but she had also turned the lesson into a small celebration, accompanied by candle lights, Christmas tree branches and gifts. She remembers that the children later continued asking to sing "Stille Nacht" during lessons or were humming the tune occasionally. She concludes in her narrative that it must have been an important gathering for them as well, and she argues that children have a great need of "such things". To her, these kinds of experiences are not "strictly religious", but they give

access to eminent “things” like a sense for community, the main substance of life and an ethical humanistic attitude.

To summarize, we could discern six different conceptualizations of “religious experience”: (1) encounter of people, rituals, and artefacts deemed religious; (2) deep emotional incidence; (3) intervention of a supernatural agency; (4) being empathic towards others; (5) moral acting, and (6) being confronted with existential questions. As shown in more details, teachers’ conceptualizations of “religious experience” differ considerably according to the question they had to answer. For the purpose of our research, this range of conceptualizations contingent upon the question turned out not to be fruitful for further analysis. Therefore, drawing on Rota & Bleisch (2017), we turned toward the analysis of the teacher’s conceptualization of “religion” and its link to strategies teaching “religion/s”.

## 4 Two Modes of teaching “Religion”

In a recent article, Rota & Bleisch (2017) proposed to differentiate and describe religious courses provided in public schools along two axes: first, the teacher’s underlying understanding of “religion”, meaning religion as *sui generis* vs. religion as a cultural system and second, their main aims, meaning the acquisition of knowledge in order to understand religious practices, artefacts and beliefs and/or the development of individual and social competences with respect to religion. Applying these heuristic categories to the analysis of our data, we could then discern two different modes of teaching “religion/s”.

### Religion Seen as a Phenomenon *Sui Generis* and Taught as a Value System

A first group of five teachers (Lina, Gaye, Anna, Saro, and Thomas) understand “religion” as a phenomenon *sui generis*. Religion, for them, is an integral part of human existence (*Menschsein*) and functions primarily as a value system. In their view, this value system impregnates not only their own attitude toward their students, but all school subjects as well. Subsequently, so-deemed “religious” questions can come up at any moment, especially in topics of “General Knowledge”, as Anna narrates:

*“At the moment I am teaching “The Farm”, and there of course are animals and we have been discussing why the cows don’t have any horns anymore; and then some children argued that one shouldn’t cut nor burn the horns of these cows, whereas others argued that you have to do it; and then we have a Tamil boy who said that in their country the cow is holy, they wouldn’t eat their meat anyway – and then the question came up: why do we eat animals, does it make sense; and then, really someone said, ooh no, meat is disgusting,*

*these are the Vegetarians in class, which then came along the Vegans; and then there arouse colourfully mixed opinions, and in the end we looked into the past to find out how it used to be in former times.”*

These five teachers also associate “religion” with an overall sense of community and social cohesion which they endeavour to create in their classes, based on values like identity building, mutual respect, acceptance, compassion and regard for the needs of the others. Lina’s narration of the Christmas celebration belongs to this group as well. For these teachers, “religion” and “religious education” equals teaching values. If they succeed, then religious tensions do not really exist, or, as Gaye puts it, religion shouldn’t be significant at all anymore. In consequence, as we have seen above, these teachers are sensitive when their own value system is challenged by students or the student’s parents, as is further illustrated by Anna. She considered the demand of parents from Jehovah’s witnesses to exclude their daughter from birthday rituals to be in contradiction to this community building aim, and she reacted strongly against it: “I didn’t make myself very much liked [by the parents], but this is a no-go with me.”

For these teachers, “religious experiences” or “things deemed religious” are a means to bring people from different backgrounds together and share important issues, like values, ecology, pluralism etc. For Gaye, one of the kindergarten teachers, talking freely about religion even means to break taboos, like the taboo on/against sexuality. In order to exemplify this, she tells us that she introduced a “demonstration day” in her class, where the children can bring along special items, among them religious things.

Through our analysis we can connect the conceptualization of “religion” of three out of these five teachers with a specific perspective regarding their teaching concept. For them, “religious education” consists in teaching values and in community building. In kindergarten and early grades – where these three persons teach – teaching values is combined with telling stories of general morality and looking into the background of Christian traditions around Christmas and Easter. But the interviewed teachers don’t teach religious topics in units with a defined didactical scheme. They are also unlikely to implement didactical concepts or teaching material, other than children’s books and stories. When talking about their students’ participation, they would describe the discussions and some of the students’ contributions, but they would neither describe the factual learning processes nor visible outcomes. We can therefore conclude that their teaching concept is a rather implicit one. It is rarely aimed at the specifically circumscribed competences or outcomes, as they are intended by the co-constructivist didactics and the curriculum. Thus, we cannot speak of an explicit didactical concept.

Saro, the secondary school teacher from this group, draws a more radical consequence: He is persuaded that his students, most of them from immigrant and of non-Christian backgrounds, must learn to accept the predominant and enlightened values of the occident derived from Judaic-Christian traditions. But he also relin-

quishes the idea of teaching defined religious topics or of applying a didactical concept, because he thinks it to be of no avail with his students.

One of the five teachers, Thomas, shares the concept of religion as a value system to be taught, but for him, religion serves primarily the individual to cope with contingency. Accordingly, biblical stories are a means to demonstrate to his students a sort of opposite but more essential meaning of life than the everyday experiences they make in school and elsewhere:

*“[...] there I am somehow personally tinged, do we have to be an accidental product by nature, for me the Bible, or rather the Religions, teach something different. There is a creator behind it all. I must pay attention to how I teach it to the class. But still, this being loved, being accepted by someone, by a greater power, which isn't just like me the teacher who always threatens to punish [...].”*

Thomas is telling Bible stories on a weekly basis, using methods and material he has been developing over many years and connecting the content of the stories with themes he deems to be relevant to the children. To him, the Bible has shaped the dominant culture and value system, and he deems it important that his students gain certain knowledge about it. Although he says that they love the stories, he also states that he gets little response, questions and learning activities from them. He sees his teaching concept somehow in tension with the fact that not all students in his class are Christians and that it could be insufficient, but he still sticks to it:

*“Other gods, this is really interesting for me. Well, Tamil children, they could come into a conflict or ask questions, but I don't get the questions, either they are too fixed, or then they like to listen to these biblical stories too, may be it has room with them as well.”*

Rota & Bleisch (2017) term this mode of teaching “religion”, combining “an interest in the acquisition of individual and social competences with a conception of religion as a fundamental dimension of all human beings”, as “existential orientation”.

### **Religion Taught as Topic of General Knowledge and Seen as a Learning Opportunity**

The second group of teachers (Angela, Erwin, Monika, Murat, Sandra, and Stefanie) defines “religion” as an aggregate of rituals, gods, buildings, norms, beliefs etc. Religion serves as a system where one belongs. In their view, people are not born religious but rather socialized (or not) in a particular religious tradition. Whereas most of the teachers in this group reduce “religion” to “the five world religions”, Murat considers “religion” as a complex system covering a historical as well as a

social-anthropologic dimension. For all of them, learning about “religion/s” in school, should be a training ground to become competent in a plural and complex society (Dressler 2012). Rota & Bleisch (2017) term this mode “social orientation”, as it focuses on “fostering a reflection on pupils’ relationships with their religious environments, as well as religious practices and artefacts they might encounter in culture and society”.

In their dealings with “religious experience”, these teachers are far more reluctant to include it directly in their teaching schemes than the teachers from the first group. They are more likely to interpret it as a possible outcome of the intended learning process, as shown above with Erwin’s narration of the Muslim boy praying. Or as Stefanie describes it:

*“Then it happens sometimes that the students tell the class, what they hang on their Christmas trees [i.e. at home]. However I didn’t really care to know about it. [...] Yes, but they continue doing it, therefore their age is somehow gratifying. I teach fourth to sixth grade, there is still this childlike behaviour shown at this age.”*

Stefanie continues her narrative of the teaching unit on light celebrations in the world religions with the depiction of a co-constructivist and active learning process:

*“In any case, the Christians, in the group of the Christians [i.e. learning about Christian light celebrations] there was this little story about the Christmas tree, and then the students really had this feeling that they wanted to hang up a few things or make a Christmas tree and hang the items up to match the story, and the things they named, and they really did it in the end.”*

The teachers of this group interpret an experience, which could also be deemed “religious”, rather in the perspective of a teaching and learning enterprise: they look upon the results of their students’ activities in the light of defined aims and competences they were working on in class.

We could conclude from this narrative and from some others in this group that it is important for these teachers to offer their students learning opportunities with freedom to explore, to form their knowledge and practise research methods. They implement action-oriented learning processes on the condition that they are integrated in well-defined and transparent learning arrangements and give way to reflection, alternatives and critical reviews. Murat, a fifth to sixth-grade teacher, narrates:

*“Now that we are reading the book “When Zeus lost his temper”, students ask questions like: Yes, Jesus is really the genuine one and the gods don’t ex-*

*ist. The students also react, for instance when they say this is a religion, which doesn't exist anymore. But after having read the book they start to think about their own religion, how it functions, then the students are much more positive about it. It is mainly in the beginning when they don't know in which direction the teaching unit will lead. We have also visited different churches, and many children said, we don't want to enter them. We told them, we go there nevertheless, and they might stay in the garden meanwhile. Finally they came along and when we stood in front of the church I said we are entering now and we stay exactly ten minutes, and you may stay outside or come inside and have a look, we will look at this, this and that and afterwards we will leave. We won't pray – and, all of the sudden, everybody was in the church. Well, they were afraid that, by entering, they would be forced to pray or to deny their own religion.”*

As this account shows, Murat's markedly complex conceptualization of “religion” allows him to organize multifaceted learning activities. Furthermore, this report also indicates the teacher's awareness of possible tensions evoked when teaching religious topics or talking about them. This holds also true for the other teachers of this group. Two teachers state, for example, that they feel insecure to deal with strongly opposite views about the origins of the universe or the uniqueness of a specific deity. Usually they know, when the respective students might be strongly opinionated because of their parents' affiliation. Monika, for example, chooses a historical approach to the evolution of humankind and she doesn't try to convince these children in order not to confuse them even more or to get in conflict with the parental authority. We can guess that to her the didactical principle of a multi-perspectival approach in “General Knowledge”, *Natur, Mensch, Gesellschaft* is very useful (Trevisan & Schmid 2015).

By analysing the interviews, we have also discovered that the teachers with this conceptualization of religion clearly refer to didactical concepts, teaching materials, the curriculum and to what is permitted in public schools (see also Bietenhard 2015). They are also far more precise and student-subject-related in describing their methods and goals as well as the learning process, learning outcomes and contributions of their students. Additionally, they are more apt to use professional didactic language. These teachers value cognitive-constructivist didactics, which support their students in building competences in order to encounter religions and worldviews and to form their own perspectives on the subject. For them, learning activities consists in inquiring things, places, buildings, people, traditions and beliefs and in exploring the realm of their religious dimensions and purposes. They use various didactical methods to enhance learning activities, which are structured, supported by materials and directed to learning outcomes, which are reflected and assessed. They see their role as teachers in organizing, structuring and supporting the students in their learning activities.

## **5 Conclusions and Prospects**

As we have shown, teachers use “religious experience” in a multitude of conceptualizations reflecting everyday understanding, but not as a theoretically informed concept. This concurs with the particular challenge of teacher’s training: How, if at all, should teachers define “religious experience” in respect of what is possible or not to do in public school, and which didactical strategies could they apply to the possible learning opportunities to “encounter religions and worldviews”? We have also attempted to show, that, when attached too easily to undefined learning occurrences, “religious experience” seems not to be useful as a didactical category, as it stays unconnected to explicit teaching strategies, concepts and curricular requirements, and, sometimes, it even gives room to intended religious experiences such as confessions or rituals in a specific religious tradition. However, our data suggest, in the light of the competence-oriented curriculum and of a co-constructivist didactical paradigm, that teachers with didactical proficiency abstain from deliberately creating religious experiences in the sense of emotional touching practices deemed religious or invoking counterintuitive agencies. They more likely plan and implement effective, competence-oriented learning opportunities when students encounter people, rituals or artefacts deemed religious.

Most of the teachers we talked to are sensitive to tensions that might be evoked by events and things deemed religious. On an ethical level, none of them tolerates disregard or hostility in their classrooms and schools in regard to cultural or religious identities. All of them are aware of the complex situation in which they have to act professionally, with respect to the cultural, religious and social diversity, but also in terms of a multitude of life styles and worldviews that are omnipresent in school. To deal with religious plurality is for the teachers out of the “religion-as-general knowledge-group” a challenge, of which they make use as a training ground for their students and their learning process. In contrast, the teachers out of the “sui generis group” advocate “our” values and are sometimes strongly irritated in their own concepts, whenever students or their parents confront them with opposite beliefs.

We have also described how manifold the occurrences are, in which teachers are dealing with “religious experience”, and this within the multitude of their other daily tasks. Teachers’ profession is never a clear-cut field. On the contrary, it is defined by its vagueness accompanied by uncertainty how to handle challenges that appear to be new as they occur (Tenorth 2006). But it should be part of teacher education to provide means to reduce uncertainty. One of these tools would consist in building profound didactical knowledge.

Finally, it is important for us to mention that, although we didn’t ask any questions on the teachers’ (religious or other) biographies, with the exception of some formal questions at the end of the interviews, we were deeply impressed by the spontaneity and richness with which our interviewees delved into biographical ac-

counts and references. The importance of dealing with one's biography alongside with professional training is known in research but sparingly applied in teacher education (Holzbrecher 2001). The impact of biographical stamps and transformations on professional life, on teaching approaches and on their didactical implication remains, to our knowledge, still a domain to be explored.

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