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Rethinking Religiously Responsive Education

Perspectives from Democratic Education and Critical Global Citizenship on a Pedagogy of Difference

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Abstract

This article develops Religiously Responsive Education (RRE) as a pedagogy of difference for educational contexts characterized by increasing religious and worldview plurality. Building on its anthropological grounding in attentiveness to existential experience, the article examines how RRE can respond to contemporary transformations in plural societies. It argues that plurality must be understood not only as demographic diversity but also in terms of structural inequalities, political contestation in public discourse, and fragmented epistemic environments shaping encounters with religious difference. Against this background, RRE is placed in dialogue with Democratic Education (DE) and Critical Global Citizenship Education (CGCE) as justice-oriented pedagogies of plurality. While DE emphasizes equality, participation, and deliberative engagement in plural democracies, CGCE highlights structural inequalities, global interdependence, and epistemic positioning. In conversation with systematic-theological reflection, these perspectives illuminate the ethical and anthropological assumptions underlying justice-oriented pedagogies. On this basis, the article proposes a development of RRE toward a justice-sensitive pedagogy of difference that integrates existential attentiveness with structural reflexivity, normative discernment, and epistemic responsibility. RRE can thus be understood not only as a concern of religious education but as a broader professional competence for educators working in plural democratic societies.

Keywords

pedagogy of difference – religious plurality – democratic education – teacher education – critical global citizenship education – religiously responsive education

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1. Theological Anthropology and the Conceptual Grounding of Religiously Responsive Education (RRE)[A]

Educational contexts are increasingly shaped by religious and worldview plurality characterized by internal diversity within traditions, communities, and families.[1] Migration, political polarization, and debates about identity and belonging contribute, among other factors, to situations where religious differences are socially negotiated and contested.[2] Difference, thus, constitutes a central reference point for RRE. Related pedagogical approaches concerned with democratic participation and social justice seek to engage difference constructively and to create equitable learning environments capable of addressing prejudice and discrimination.[3] However, plurality does not automatically lead to mutual recognition; it may instead intensify stereotyping, exclusion, and group-based hostility. Studies indicate that prejudices against religious groups—particularly Muslims and Jews—remain widespread and socially embedded.[4] Large-scale analyses further suggest that attitudes grounded in an *Ideologie der Ungleichwertigkeit* (ideology of inequality) persist within segments of the societal center.[5] Recognition of difference, therefore, cannot be assumed as a stable cultural achievement but must be cultivated within educational practice. Educational institutions face not only the diversity of social reality but also the challenge of fostering responsible engagement with religious differences in contested normative contexts.[6] In this horizon, RRE emerges as a pedagogical approach that requires conceptual clarification.

The anthropological foundation of RRE is closely linked to Martin Lechner's existential perspective, as it places religious education within a wider reflection on human experience.[7] He differentiates between everyday experience, religious experience, and confessional experience. Everyday experiences constitute the ground of human life; religious experiences refer to moments in which individuals perceive a "deeper dimension" of reality; confessional experiences represent

A Working definition: Religiously responsive education is a justice-sensitive approach that treats learners' religious and worldview identities, knowledge, and practices as legitimate resources for learning. Following the logic of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018), it asks educators to engage religious diversity deliberately and reflectively rather than marginalize it. In German-language discourse, the closest equivalent is *religionssensible Bildung*.

1 Das, Veena (2013) 69–84.

2 Berger, Peter (2014) 68–78.

3 Trifonas, Peter (2003) 2.

4 Stockinger, Helena (2021) 143–144.

5 Zick, Andreas / Küpper, Beate / Mokros, Niko / Eden, Marco (2025) 149–151.

6 Jackson, Robert (2004) 4–21.

7 Lechner, Martin (2009a) 104–113.

institutionalized interpretations of such experiences.[8] This differentiation allows RRE to acknowledge existential depth without presupposing confessional belonging. The model does not assume universal religiosity but recognizes that individuals confront questions of meaning, contingency, vulnerability, and relationality, while religions can provide historically and culturally shaped interpretations of such experiences. Religion is thus approached as one horizon within broader processes of human self-interpretation.[9] The so-called "anthropological turn" in practical theology emphasizes that faith concerns concrete human existence rather than abstract doctrinal systems.[10] Practical theology is often discussed as attentive to the "signs of the times" and to contexts in which faith becomes meaningful within lived reality.[11] From this standpoint, theological anthropology does not presuppose universal religiosity but acknowledges that individuals interpret their existence within normative and symbolic horizons. Religion may thus be understood as orientation toward what is experienced as ultimate, without implying uniform belief or confessional homogeneity.[12] Such an approach allows RRE to address existential depth without dissolving plurality into homogenization or relativism.

This broad concept of religion, oriented toward Tillich's notion of ultimate concern, is not without difficulties. Detaching religious experience from confessional or institutional specificity risks blurring the disciplinary profile of religious education, dissolving it into a generalized existential pedagogy under a different name. This tension is not new: comparable objections were raised for example against problem-oriented religious education (*Problemorientierter Religionsunterricht*), which was criticized for its sociologizing tendency and its neglect of confessional identity and biblical tradition.[13] RRE's reliance on a broad concept of religion consequently requires ongoing critical reflection: existential openness must be balanced against the need to preserve religious education's distinctive competence in engaging concrete religious traditions, symbols, and practices, rather than collapsing religion into a generic category of meaning-making.

8 Lechner, Martin (2009b) 162–164.

9 Knoblauch, Christoph / Weber, Judith (2018).

10 Boschki, Reinhold (2007) 32; Mette, Norbert (2005) 63.

11 Mette, Norbert (2006) 269.

12 Tillich, Paul (1957) 1–4: Tillich's notion of ultimate concern designates that which unconditionally claims a person, the concern in which being or non-being is at stake, and it is therefore defined formally rather than by any particular religious content. Faith, on this account, is the state of being ultimately concerned, which allows RRE to recognize secular commitments as functionally religious while retaining a critical criterion: finite concerns raised to ultimacy remain distinguishable from what genuinely bears unconditional significance.

13 Knauth, Thorsten (2003) 268–271, 309.

In this context, the concept of "sensibility/responsiveness" further specifies this anthropological grounding. *Religionssensibilität* (religious responsiveness) denotes less a body of doctrinal knowledge than a reflective pedagogical stance characterized by attentiveness, empathy, and reflexivity.[14] Educational frameworks like the *Orientierungsplan Baden-Württemberg* (2025) emphasize this orientation.[15] Such epistemic modesty affirms the other's right to difference and resists the appropriation of religious expressions. However, studies of religious difference in contexts such as early childhood education show that plurality is often negotiated within organizational cultures shaped by power relations and implicit norms.[16] A conception of RRE limited to existential attentiveness would therefore remain insufficient; it must also address structural conditions, group dynamics, and affective dimensions shaping encounters with religious difference. From this perspective, RRE is becoming an increasingly important professional skill for all educators. Religious and worldview plurality is encountered across all educational settings. Religious responsiveness can thus be seen as a skill that educators are required to cultivate. Because existential questions, religious symbols, and worldview references emerge beyond formal religious instruction, educators require the capacity to engage such dimensions responsibly. This includes recognizing prejudice, facilitating dialogue, and navigating normative tensions within democratic frameworks.[17]

Taken together, the existential-anthropological foundation, the focus on sensibility and responsiveness, and attention to structural conditions show that RRE can be seen as a pedagogy of difference with importance beyond the field of religious education. Individuals interpret their lives within culturally and religiously shaped horizons of meaning, and educational professionalism accordingly requires attentiveness to both existential and social dimensions of experience. While this anthropological perspective does not resolve the normative questions raised by democratic and justice-oriented discourses, it provides a basis for situating RRE within them.

Democratic Education (DE) and Critical Global Citizenship Education (CGCE) accordingly constitute important interlocutors. Both address how education can respond to plural societies, shape encounters with difference in accordance with democratic principles, and critically examine prejudice and exclusion within educational contexts. They extend pedagogical reflection beyond interpersonal atti-

14 Lechner, Martin / Gabriel, Angelika (2011) 9.

15 Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg (2025) 211–225.

16 Stockinger, Helena (2018) 97–111.

17 Schluss, Henning (2011) 222.

tudes toward structural conditions, power relations, and global interdependence.[18] These perspectives can provide conceptual resources for relating questions of religious difference to broader debates about democracy, justice, and social responsibility in education.[19] The following section accordingly places this anthropologically grounded understanding of RRE in dialogue with DE and CGCE.

2. Plurality under Contemporary Conditions: Structural, Political, and Epistemic Transformations

Plurality in contemporary societies cannot be reduced to demographic diversity.[20] It unfolds within structural transformations that reshape public discourse, institutional frameworks, and processes of identity formation. Religious and worldview plurality today appears intensified, socially stratified, politically contested, and epistemically fragmented. Educational reflection must therefore move beyond descriptive acknowledgment toward analytical differentiation.[21]

2.1 Structural Intensification and Intersectional Entanglements

Plurality has undergone qualitative transformation. It no longer refers only to the coexistence of distinct religious traditions but also includes internal differentiation within traditions, individualized constructions of belief, and hybrid identity configurations. In educational contexts, religious and non-religious orientations cannot be treated as stable group properties; they appear fluid, biographically shaped, and context-dependent.[22]

Plurality is also structurally embedded. Religious belonging intersects with other axes of difference such as gender and socio-economic status, shaping recognition, participation, and exclusion in educational contexts.[23] These intersections operate within broader social inequalities and institutional arrangements that privilege certain identities and forms of knowledge. Religious difference thus becomes socially significant in interaction with other structural markers. Educational institutions operate within these asymmetrical conditions and may repro-

18 Nussbaum, Martha (2006) 385–395.

19 González-Valencia, Gustavo / Massip Sabater, Mariona / Santisteban Fernández, Antoni (2022) 1–13.

20 This article uses plurality as its primary analytical category, denoting the coexistence of multiple religious and worldview positions within a shared social space. Diversity and heterogeneity are used where the cited literature employs them, respectively to describe demographic composition and the internal non-uniformity of traditions and groups; the three terms overlap but are not treated as strictly synonymous.

21 Grümme, Bernhard (2021) 35–40.

22 Koukounaras-Liagkis, Marios (2015) 88–89.

23 Knauth, Thorsten (2017) 13–32.

duce symbolic hierarchies or promote more inclusive practices. Plurality thus raises questions of institutional responsibility and justice-sensitive reflection.[24] These dynamics are closely related to debates in social-scientific and religious-education debate on superdiversity,[25] intersectionality, and heterogeneity, which similarly emphasize that religious plurality cannot be treated as a stable descriptive category but must be analyzed in its entanglement with other social differences and institutional structures.[26]

2.2 Political Contestation and Religion in the Public Sphere

Plurality unfolds within contested public spheres in which religion continues to function as a source of symbolic identification and normative language in debates about social cohesion and the common good.[27] Educational reflection must consequently examine how religious and non-religious convictions appear in public discourse and relate to democratic norms. Religious education scholarship describes this development as a "public turn," indicating the increasing orientation of religious education toward challenges of public life in plural societies.[28]

Educational settings reflect these tensions. They must navigate between recognition of difference and commitment to shared democratic principles, as well as between communicability in plural democracies and the persistence of particular convictions. While plurality may enable dialogue, it can also intensify boundary-making and polarization when convictions are mobilized for exclusionary purposes.[29] Educational responses must therefore avoid both norm-free neutrality and normativity that suppresses difference.[30]

2.3 Epistemic Fragmentation and Competing Truth Claims

Plurality is also epistemic. Learners encounter competing truth claims through diverse media environments in which religious, secular, and hybrid narratives coexist and contest one another. Educational engagement with religion must

24 Fraser, Nancy (2008) 2.

25 Vertovec, Steven (2007) 1024–1054.

26 Grümme, Bernhard (2017) 84–88; Könemann, Judith (2021) 1–17.

27 Pirner, Manfred (2018) 1–7.

28 Grümme, Bernhard (2021) 36.

29 Brubaker, Rogers (2013) 3–4.

30 Biesta, Gert (2011) 84–87.

therefore address not only content but also modes of justification, interpretation, and critique.[31]

Two reductive tendencies frequently emerge in this context: rigid absolutization that closes dialogical space and unreflective relativization that undermines normative discernment.[32] Both weaken democratic dialogue. Educational practice, therefore, requires epistemic responsibility–the capacity to engage competing claims, identify stereotypes, and distinguish critique from delegitimization. Plurality should neither be romanticized as inherently emancipatory nor pathologized as inherently conflictual; it constitutes a structurally ambivalent condition requiring reflective professional competence.

2.4 Transitional Thesis

Religious and worldview plurality unfolds through structural inequalities, political contestation in the public sphere, and fragmented epistemic environments. These dynamics shape how religious difference is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated within educational contexts. Against this background, Religiously Responsive Education cannot be understood solely as existential attentiveness. While attentiveness to existential questions remains central to its anthropological grounding, plural educational settings also require capacities to address structural inequalities, public controversies, and competing truth claims.

Educational engagement with religion takes place within plural democratic publics and requires balancing respect for differing convictions with commitment to shared democratic principles. It thus involves supporting learners in critically engaging competing truth claims and stereotypical representations within reflective dialogue. RRE can thus be understood as more than existential meaning-making alone: it also functions as a professional competence for engaging religious difference within plural democratic societies.

31 Adam, Gottfried / Lachmann, Rainer (2014) 145–146.

32 Koukounaras-Liagkis, Marios (2015) 92–93.

3. Democratic Education and Critical Global Citizenship Education as Justice-Oriented Pedagogies of Plurality – and their Theological Resonance

3.1 DE and CGCE as Justice-Oriented Pedagogies of Plurality

DE and CGCE have developed as closely related pedagogical responses to intensified plurality, political polarization, and structural inequality. Although they differ in emphasis and genealogy, both address challenges facing democratic cultures under contemporary conditions.[33] Both also resonate with the broader Anglo-American tradition of Social Justice Education and Critical Pedagogy, which likewise conceptualizes education as a site for confronting oppression, cultivating critical consciousness, and enacting democratic participation.[34] While DE and CGCE are the primary interlocutors pursued here, this article does not attempt a systematic engagement with this wider tradition; the focus reflects the aim of situating RRE specifically within democratic and global-citizenship discourses rather than a claim that these are the only relevant frameworks.

DE, particularly in critical-philosophical traditions, rejects the reduction of citizenship to civic knowledge or behavioral adaptation and instead understands citizenship as the enactment of equality.[35] Citizenship therefore involves not only legal membership in a political order but also the capacity to contest and reshape it.[36] Democratic subjectivity is thus conceived as the formation of individuals capable of appearing as political equals in public life.[37] Educational practices that position students solely as future citizens risk postponing democratic agency and reinforcing hierarchical assumptions about competence.

DE also emphasizes the institutional dimension of democracy. Democratic culture must be practiced within educational institutions through participation, non-authoritarian governance, and recognition of students' rights.[38] These practices shape how learners experience participation and voice in everyday pedagogical settings. DE accordingly combines political literacy, value orientation - particularly human rights and plural democracy – and participatory practice.[39]

33 Gutmann, Amy (1999) 288–291; Osler, Audrey / Starkey, Hugh (2005) 26–37.

34 e.g. Freire, Paulo (1970); Giroux, Henry (2011); Adams, Maurianne / Bell, Lee Anne / Griffin, Pat (2016).

35 Parker, Walter (2003) 20–24.

36 Andreotti, Vanessa (2006) 40–51.

37 Ruitenberg, Claudia (2015) 1–9.

38 Biesta, Gert (2016) 137–142.

39 Council of Europe (2018) (Vols. 1–3) 7–11; Grümme, Bernhard (2025) 37–38.

CGCE shares these commitments but expands the analytical horizon toward global interdependence and structural asymmetry. It critiques approaches to global citizenship focused primarily on empathy while neglecting historical and economic inequalities. Instead, CGCE foregrounds questions of power, complicity, and epistemic positioning, encouraging learners to examine how global systems of production, knowledge, and representation shape moral and political agency.[40] This expanded horizon draws on analyses of global interdependence and cosmopolitanism in higher education,[41] as well as on longstanding debates about whether global citizenship remains too abstract to translate into curriculum practice.[42] In this context, CGCE highlights the global and historical contexts shaping identities, cultural narratives, and religious representations.

Human rights discourse functions as an important normative horizon in both approaches. DE frameworks often connect citizenship education with cultures of human rights, pluralism, and the rule of law.[43] CGCE, while critical of unreflective universalism, treats human rights as a site of contestation and translation rather than a fixed moral vocabulary. Commitments to dignity, equality, and non-discrimination remain central but are accompanied by reflection on whose interpretations of these norms prevail.[44]

Both discourses reject romanticized understandings of plurality and recognize disagreement as a constitutive element of democratic life. They also emphasize that plural contexts are shaped by structural inequalities and therefore require attentiveness to how assumptions–for example, Eurocentric perspectives–may influence interpretations of cultural or religious difference.[45] In this regard, democratic education highlights equality and participation within institutional settings, while critical global citizenship education adds particular attention to structural and epistemic reflexivity in global contexts. Their convergence becomes particularly visible in the shared emphasis on responsibility. Responsibility is understood not merely as compliance with norms but as participation in shared political worlds– – locally and globally – and as a willingness to respond when equality or rights are undermined.[46]

40 Andreotti, Vanessa (2006) 40–51.

41 Torres, Carlos (2015) 262–279.

42 Davies, Lynn (2006) 5–25.

43 Council of Europe (2018) (Vol. 1) 8–9.

44 Andreotti, Vanessa (2006) 45, 47, 49.

45 González-Valencia, Gustavo / Massip Sabater, Mariona / Santisteban Fernández, Antoni (2022) 1–13.

46 Biesta, Gert (2011) 1–4.

For teacher education this convergence implies demanding professional expectations. Educators must facilitate disagreement without allowing antagonism, address structural injustices without reducing educational practice to ideology, and support normative orientation without moral coercion. These tensions belong to the dynamics of democratic pedagogy itself.

3.2 Theological Resonance

Although democratic education (DE) and critical global citizenship education (CGCE) are primarily articulated within pedagogical discourse, their normative concerns – equality, justice, participation, and responsibility – connect with themes in contemporary theology. The following reflections do not introduce theology as an external normative authority for educational theory. Rather, selected strands of systematic theology are considered as interpretive interlocutors whose anthropological and ethical insights might illuminate questions already present within justice-oriented pedagogies. In this context, Liberation Theology can serve as a particularly relevant dialogue partner through its emphasis on the relationship among reflection, historical experience, and social conditions.[47] These normative concerns also resonate with a well-established strand of German-language practical theology that discusses religious education as politically situated, insisting that it engage questions of justice, participation, and public responsibility rather than remain confined to confessional transmission.[48]

A first point of resonance concerns the connection between normative reflection and experiences of injustice. Liberation Theology situates theological reasoning within historical praxis and social analysis, emphasizing that reflection emerges from engagement with concrete situations of exclusion and suffering.[49] Political and practical theology likewise emphasize attentiveness to the "signs of the times," interpreting social realities as contexts in which questions of justice and responsibility become visible.[50] In dialogue with DE and CGCE, this perspective highlights that educational engagement with plurality must address the contexts in which inequalities of recognition, participation, and power arise.

47 Stålsett, Sturla (2019) 872–881.

48 e.g. Schlag, Thomas (2010); Könemann, Judith / Mette, Norbert (2013); Gärtner, Claudia / Herbst, Jan-Hendrik (2020); Grümme, Bernhard (2025).

49 Gutiérrez, Gustavo (1988) 8,11.

50 Metz, Johann Baptist (1998) 45.

A second point of convergence concerns Liberation Theology's orientation toward marginalized perspectives.[51] The "preferential option for the poor" functions both as an ethical commitment and as a hermeneutical principle asking whose experiences become visible within interpretive frameworks.[52] In educational contexts, this perspective draws attention to how certain religious, cultural, or ideological positions become institutionally empowered while others remain marginalized. Such concerns parallel CGCE's emphasis on structural complicity and epistemic positioning and align with DE's focus on equality as enacted practice. Systematic theological anthropology similarly emphasizes that recognition of the dignity of the other[53] requires attentiveness to asymmetries of power and voice within social relations.[54]

A third point of resonance concerns the concept of hope. In Liberation Theology, hope is not discussed as abstract optimism but as a historically situated orientation, grounded in promise and emerging within contexts of injustice and fragility.[55] Hope sustains the possibility of transformation despite structural constraints. In educational theory this perspective counterbalances both naïve idealism and political cynicism. DE requires realistic engagement with conflict and polarization, yet pedagogical commitment to democratic life presupposes confidence that forms of shared political coexistence remain possible.

Finally, Liberation Theology's attentiveness to epistemic location resonates with systematic-theological reflections on the situated character of knowledge. Contemporary theology increasingly emphasizes that moral and theological reasoning emerge within historically and culturally embedded perspectives rather than neutral vantage points.[56] Such insights parallel critiques of universalized knowledge claims in CGCE. Acknowledging epistemic situatedness does not relativize truth claims but invites reflection on how claims to truth and justice are articulated and whose experiences they represent.[57] Within educational contexts this perspective supports dialogical engagement in which differing interpretations are examined in relation to their historical and social contexts.

51 Metz, Johann Baptist (2007) 68.

52 Echeverria, Javier (2014) 47–68.

53 Levinas, Emmanuel (1969) 99; Volf, Miroslav (1996) 29.

54 Rahner, Karl (1978) 25, 116.

55 Moltmann, Jürgen (1993) 16, 21.

56 Bevans, Steven (2002) 3.

57 On hope as an orientation grounded in promise, which has been formative for liberation theoloy, see Moltmann (1993/1964, pp. 16, 21); for its development within liberation theoloy, see Gutiérrez (1988).

4. Developing RRE as a Justice-Sensitive Pedagogy of Difference

If DE and CGCE are understood as justice-oriented pedagogies of plurality, the question arises how RRE may be further developed in dialogue with these perspectives. As discussed in the preceding sections, RRE is grounded in attentiveness to existential experience, dialogical engagement across religious and worldview differences, and the professional capacity to address religion as a lived and socially embedded reality. Engagement with DE and CGCE in turn offers analytical resources for clarifying the normative orientation of RRE under contemporary conditions of plurality.

Central to the RRE approach are guiding principles that articulate how religious responsiveness can be translated into educational practice.[58] In what follows, these principles are interpreted through the analytical framework developed in the preceding sections, situating RRE within broader debates on plurality, justice, and democratic responsibility.

Guiding Principle 1: Attentiveness to Existential Experience

The first guiding principle concerns attentiveness to learners' everyday and existential experiences. Situations involving trust, hope, joy, loneliness, or insecurity may carry existential or religious dimensions that emerge in ordinary educational interactions.

For educators this requires attentiveness to how learners articulate questions of identity, belonging, or fairness through narratives, emotions, or responses to social events. Recognizing such expressions as starting points for reflection allows connections to be drawn between personal experiences and broader questions of meaning. For example, a student's unease after media coverage attributing a violent act to a religious group, or a child's question about why a classmate fasts during Ramadan, can become such starting points, opening reflection on belonging, prejudice, and shared vulnerability rather than being brushed aside as merely factual or disciplinary matters.

From the perspectives of DE and CGCE, these experiences are also shaped by broader social contexts, e.g., migration histories, minority-majority relations, and public representations of religious communities. Reflection on such experiences can therefore connect personal perspectives with wider questions of justice, dignity, and coexistence in plural societies.

58 Lechner, Martin (2009a) 104–113; Weber, Judith (2014) 154–166.

Guiding Principle 2: Institutional Norms and Democratic Responsibility

The second guiding principle concerns the institutional dimension of educational practice. Norms such as fairness, participation, respect, and trust structure everyday interactions and function as implicit forms of civic education.

Within RRE this means that religious responsiveness becomes visible not only in explicit discussions of religion but also in the quality of relationships within educational communities. Practices of participation, transparent decision-making, and mutual respect communicate normative commitments that shape experiences of belonging and recognition. Decisions about whether and how to accommodate prayer times, dietary requirements, or religious holidays, for instance, translate abstract commitments to fairness into concrete, consequential institutional practice.

DE highlights participation and shared responsibility within institutions, while CGCE encourages reflection on how institutional arrangements may reproduce broader patterns of inequality. The constructive reflection of structures in educational institutions, in turn, can play a key role in creating environments where religious and worldview differences can be expressed without marginalization.

Guiding Principle 3: Educational Spaces as Sites of Plural Encounter

Educational institutions function as everyday spaces in which learners encounter diverse religious and worldview perspectives. The design of relationships, shared practices, and spatial arrangements, therefore, carries pedagogical significance.

Such environments can foster capacities for respectful engagement with difference, provided that educational practices remain attentive to questions of inclusion and recognition. DE emphasizes dialogue and participation in negotiating shared norms, while CGCE encourages reflection on the broader social and historical dynamics shaping cultural and religious differences. These broader contexts may become directly relevant for the development of educational spaces, for example through critical reflection on the presence and interpretation of religious symbols and signs.

Guiding Principle 4: Educational Potential of Shared and Biographical Events

Biographical events, celebrations, and institutional festivities often create occasions for reflecting on identity, belonging, and collective life. These moments

can provide opportunities to explore how individuals relate to cultural and religious traditions within educational settings.

At the same time, such practices require critical reflection. When celebrations present religious traditions primarily as elements of cultural heritage, they may risk simplifying religious diversity or overlooking questions of representation and power. For example, a Christmas celebration that frames the nativity story solely as shared cultural heritage, without acknowledging its theological significance for practicing Christians or the position of learners for whom it holds no such significance, illustrates this risk. Engagement with DE and CGCE, therefore, encourages attention to how such events are organized and interpreted so that they can support inclusive participation and reflective dialogue.

Guiding Principle 5: Networking with the Social and Religious Environment

Educational institutions operate within broader social environments shaped by religious and cultural diversity. Encounters with religious communities, cultural organizations, or civic initiatives can therefore provide opportunities for learners to engage with perspectives beyond the classroom.

Such encounters require careful preparation in order to support reflective engagement rather than reinforce stereotypes. They may also encourage learners to consider how religious identities are represented in public discourse and how broader processes such as migration and globalization shape local religious landscapes.

Guiding Principle 6: Religious Responsiveness as Professional Competence

The final guiding principle concerns the professional dimension of religious responsiveness. *Religionssensibilität* can be understood as a professional competence involving awareness of one's own assumptions, openness to biographical reflection, and the capacity to engage religious and worldview plurality in pedagogically responsible ways.

Educational encounters with religious difference frequently arise in discussions of social events, personal experiences, or public debates. Educators, therefore, require the ability to facilitate dialogue in contexts marked by disagreement while maintaining orientation toward equality, mutual respect, and democratic participation.[59]

59 Boehme, Katja (2025) 54–59.

CGCE complements this perspective by emphasizing reflection on how representations of religious communities are shaped by broader social and global dynamics. Approaches that emphasize openness and respect remain important but must also address the structural contexts in which religious differences are interpreted.

RRE as a Justice-Sensitive Pedagogy of Difference

Together, these guiding principles point to the potential for developing RRE toward a more explicitly justice-sensitive pedagogy of difference. Questions of religious and worldview plurality emerge not only in discussions of belief but also in everyday experiences, institutional practices, shared events, community encounters, and the professional reflexivity of educators.

In this context, DE highlights participation and recognition within educational institutions, while CGCE draws attention to structural and global conditions shaping the interpretation of religious difference. Within this framework, recognition of plurality extends beyond interpersonal tolerance toward the creation of educational spaces in which disagreement can be expressed without exclusion and diverse perspectives examined in relation to questions of justice and coexistence.

RRE can thus be understood as a pedagogical approach that prepares learners for responsible participation in societies characterized by religious and worldview diversity. In this perspective, insights from DE and CGCE situate RRE not only within religious education but also within a broader framework of professional competence required for educators in plural societies.

5. Outlook: RRE in the Horizon of Public Responsibility

This article has argued that RRE can be understood as a professional competence for all educators working within plural democratic societies. In contexts of evolving religious and worldview plurality, educational practice requires more than dialogical openness or cultural responsiveness.[60] As the preceding analysis has shown, DE and CGCE articulate pedagogical responses to structural inequality, contested public spheres, and epistemic fragmentation. Both approaches are grounded in human rights, plural democracy, and the equal dignity of persons. Plurality must therefore neither be romanticized nor treated merely as a

60 Gorski, Paul (2008) 517–520; Barrett, Martyn / Byram, Michael / Lázár, Ildikó / Mompoint-Gaillard, Pascale / Philippou, Stavroula (2014) 16–18.

management problem; it calls for capacities of discernment, structural reflexivity, and responsible participation.

Engagement with these pedagogical discourses does not displace the theological dimension of RRE but invites it to clarify its public and normative commitments. In this regard, strands of political theology influenced by Liberation Theology offer conceptual resources. Johann Baptist Metz's concept of the "dangerous memory" (*memoria passionis*) situates religious reflection within histories of suffering and exclusion, insisting that faith remains accountable to the victims of history and to the unfinished project of justice.[61] Metz's New Political Theology (*Neue Politische Theologie*) should not be conflated with Liberation Theology as discussed above: whereas Liberation Theology developed primarily within Latin American contexts of poverty and political oppression and grounds theological reflection in the lived praxis of the poor, Metz's political theology emerged from a European, post-Holocaust context and foregrounds the interruptive function of remembering suffering as a critique of a privatized, bourgeois Christianity. Read as distinct but complementary rather than interchangeable, the two traditions can offer different, mutually clarifying resources for a justice-sensitive RRE.[62] Interpreted in the context of educational discourse, this perspective may help strengthen a justice-sensitive orientation within RRE: Religious plurality is not only a matter of coexistence of beliefs but is entangled with experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and symbolic violence. A pedagogy of difference informed by such theological awareness resists reducing religion to cultural folklore and recognizes that religious and worldview convictions carry existential and public significance. Metz's political theology does not provide a blueprint for educational practice; its relevance lies in its methodological posture of remembering suffering as a critical lens for evaluating social arrangements. This converges with DE's presupposition of equality and with CGCE's attention to structural asymmetry. Together, these perspectives can encourage educators to consider how institutional practices and public discourses affect those most vulnerable within plural societies.

Understanding RRE as a professional competence for all teachers, in turn, situates it within a broader democratic context. It cultivates existential reflexivity without privatizing religion, fosters recognition of plurality without abandoning normative clarity, and supports relational engagement without suppressing conflict. By integrating justice-sensitive recognition, normative discernment, and

61 Metz, Johann Baptist (2007) 5–10.

62 On the specifically Latin American, poverty-focused genealogy of Liberation Theology see Gutiérrez, Gustavo (1988); on Metz's distinct, post-Holocaust European genealogy of political theology see Metz, Johann Baptist (2007) 68–75.

structural reflexivity, RRE can help sustain democratic cultures in conditions of plurality. Such an orientation does not resolve tensions between competing truth claims or eliminate social conflict. It does, however, equip educators to navigate these tensions responsibly – neither collapsing into relativism nor resorting to coercive normativity. RRE can thus be understood as a pedagogy of difference that supports DE and CGCE by cultivating justice-oriented public responsibility.

This article develops RRE against the background of confessionally organized religious education, as practiced in Germany and comparable European contexts rather than presupposing a non-confessional or purely pluralistic model of religious instruction. Even within confessionally organized classrooms, learner populations are often religiously and denominationally heterogeneous, so that questions of plurality, recognition, and justice-sensitivity remain pedagogically significant. RRE is therefore not conceived as an alternative to confessional religious education but as an orientation that can be integrated within it, informing how confessional RE responds to the plurality present among its learners. How this integration might differ across more strongly confessional systems remains a task for future comparative work. Future research may further explore how such a justice-sensitive understanding of religious responsiveness can be developed within teacher education and institutional cultures of schooling in plural societies.

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