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## **THEOLOGY: STILL NEEDED IN SCHOOLS? RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN CROATIA AND GERMANY**

### **Abstract**

*This contribution brings together the framework conditions for religious education in Germany and Croatia. Specifically, it addresses the sustainability of a subject that is currently facing a multitude of enquiries regarding its profile. The contribution seeks to open up perspectives that reflect on the transnational expansion of religious education. Theology, as the reference discipline of religious education, is critically questioned in its role and reemphasized as a practice of reflection, and it is repositioned within religious education. This is done with the aim of promoting a religious education that is future-oriented and based on dialog.*

**Keywords:** Religious Education, Theological Reflection, Pluralism in Society, Croatia, Germany

### **Introduction**

What is the state of confessional religious education in the face of increasing enquiries that question its existence and its legitimacy?

This question occupied the two authors during an international conference and research cooperation between the universities of Bochum and Zagreb. It already became clear there that this perspective can be decisively sharpened in a useful way through a transnational expansion. The conference already indicated that similar, above all social, transformation dynamics affect the sphere of religion as well as the context of religious education – on the basis of different framework conditions and traditions in both countries. Thus, the following contribution represents

a possible attempt to open up new perspectives from this international cooperation in order to reflect on the question introduced at the beginning. In this context, (1) current social developments affecting religious education and the basic framework conditions of the subject, on the institutional and content levels, are outlined in cross-section. In view of the limited scope of the contribution, it is of course not possible to claim that the subject is covered completely. The explanations should rather be understood as an attempt to outline fundamental tendencies and implications that constitute perspectives, particularly against a background of transnational expansion.

In the discourse on denominational religious education, (2) the question of the significance of theology for religious education processes appears to be decisive and trend-setting: Does a denominational framework that sees itself as referring to theology as its reference science still constitute an appropriate concept at all? Has theology in this role not already been predominantly replaced by models more focused on the study of religion, and sent into retirement? Here, an attempt is made to discuss (3) the context of 'theologicity' from this transnational perspective, with an attempt to profile theology in its context as a reflection of the God believed in. This perspective thus opens a more global approach. Here, (4) impulses for the design of a future-oriented religious education will be gained, but at the same time the limits of these implications will be worked on. The results gained in the course of this article will be condensed to the central question posed at the beginning of this paper: How can we think of a future-oriented religious education that deals with the transformation dynamics and legitimation demands that are made upon it in such a way that its educational potential does not fade? The article ends with (5) a conclusion.

## **1. The Situation of Religious Education in German-Croatian Comparison**

### **1.1. Religious Education in Germany**

#### *1.1.1. German religious context*

In 2022, for the first time, fewer than half of the German population were members of a church.<sup>1</sup> This is mainly due to a continuous and

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1 Cf. SEKRETARIAT DER DEUTSCHEN BISCHOFSSKONFERENZ (Hg.): *Katholische Kirche in Deutschland. Zahlen und Fakten*, Bonn, 2022., 74.

accelerating loss of members over several years. Of course, this requires a differentiated view of individual federal states, in which the progress of this trend varies from state to state. Gert Pickel, for example, still differentiates in this respect between higher denominational affiliation in Western Germany and higher denominational absence of affiliation in Eastern Germany, but he demonstrates a continuous growth of the group of non-denominational people for both areas.<sup>2</sup>

This is also confirmed by the figures and data recently published by the German Bishops' Conference with regard to denominations and religions: In the eastern federal states, depending on the region, between 3.1 and 7.5 percent of the population are Catholic. In the northern states between 5.5 percent (e.g. Schleswig-Holstein) and 15.3 percent (e.g. Lower Saxony). In the southern federal states, the proportion of Catholics is considerably higher: 43.5 percent in Bavaria and 50.8 percent in Saarland.<sup>3</sup> Taking into account all demographic factors and social dynamics (such as admissions and re-admissions, but also departures from the church), it can be stated that the membership figures within both the Catholic and Protestant churches are now continuously and significantly shrinking. According to data from July 2023, 47.8 percent of the population in Germany are either non-denominational or of a non-Christian faith, which also includes the other two monotheistic religions. For example, Irme Stetter-Karp, President of the Central Committee of German Catholics, summarizes the recently collected data regarding religious affiliations as a development towards broader multi-religiousness.<sup>4</sup>

When presenting these figures, it should be pointed out that these categorizations do not go into the details of individual religiosity, and the statistics must always be understood against this background.

### 1.1.2. Religious Education

In the course of these developmental dynamics, what is the situation regarding religious education, particularly in its denominational or professorial form, which appears to be increasingly in demand? At first

2 Cf. PICKEL, Gert, „Religion, Konfessionslosigkeit und Atheismus in der deutschen Gesellschaft – eine Darstellung auf der Basis sozial-empirischer Untersuchungen“, in: THÖRNER, Katja - THURNER, Martin (Hg.), *Religion, Konfessionslosigkeit und Atheismus*, Freiburg 2016., 189f.

3 Cf. SEKRETARIAT DER DEUTSCHEN BISCHOFSSKONFERENZ (Hg.), *Katholische Kirche in Deutschland. Zahlen und Fakten*, Bonn, 2023., 70.

4 Cf. SEKRETARIAT DER DEUTSCHEN BISCHOFSSKONFERENZ (Hg.), *Katholische Kirche in Deutschland. Zahlen und Fakten*, Bonn, 2023., 70.

glance, the accelerating decline in church membership on the one hand and the provision of denominational religious education on the other seem to contradict each other.

In addition, a significant factor for questions regarding the whole concept of religious education is the discrepancy just described among the federal states of Germany. Within the framework of the following basic considerations regarding the status of religious education in Germany, I will concentrate on the federal states of North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony and Hamburg, which, with reference to respective developments in school policy regarding religious education, represent the spectrum of different models of religious education<sup>5</sup>. However, I will also offer a brief, corresponding overview of the current nationwide developments in religious education.

As a premise, recourse to the Basic Law (Grundgesetz), here specifically to Article 7, Paragraph 3, is elementary, from which the corresponding implications for religious education and its developments in the individual federal states are derived:

Der Religionsunterricht ist in den öffentlichen Schulen mit Ausnahme der bekenntnisfreien Schulen ordentliches Lehrfach. Unbeschadet des staatlichen Aufsichtsrechtes wird der Religionsunterricht in Übereinstimmung mit den Grundsätzen der Religionsgemeinschaften erteilt. Kein Lehrer darf gegen seinen Willen verpflichtet werden, Religionsunterricht zu erteilen.<sup>6</sup>

According to the School Act (Schulgesetz) and specifically related to North Rhine-Westphalia, religious education must be provided separately according to confession and in accordance with the teachings and principles of the respective church or religious community.<sup>7</sup> Since the 2018/19 school year, it has also been possible to teach Catholic and Protestant students together within the framework of the so-called 'kokoRU' (konfessionell-kooperativer Religionsunterricht);<sup>8</sup> in the 2021/22 school year, more than 108,500 children and young people were taught at a total of 536 schools in

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5 Cf. WOPPOWA, Jan, *Quo Vadis? Aktuelle Modelle des schulischen Religionsunterrichtes im Vergleich*, Ostfildern, 2023., 141-147.

6 Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland Art. 7, Abs. 3.: <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/gg/BJNR000010949.html>.

7 Cf. Schulgesetz NRW §31 Abs 1.

8 Denominationally cooperative religious education. Cf. <https://www.schulministerium.nrw/konfessionelle-kooperation-im-religionsunterricht>.

a corresponding concept.<sup>9</sup> The model is preceded by the consensus on this possibility to be constituted by both churches. For example, the Diocese of Essen, the Protestant Church of Westphalia and those in the Rhineland declare in a joint agreement on confessional cooperation in religious education that confessional cooperative religious education is also confessional religious education in the sense of the Basic Law, as it is legally considered religious education of the religious community to which the teacher belongs.<sup>10</sup>

As a first interim conclusion, it could be said that North Rhine-Westphalia continues to adhere to a confessional perspective which, among other things, also refers to (Catholic) theology as a decisive reference science.

In Lower Saxony, Christian Religious Education (CRU<sup>11</sup>) sees itself as the conceptual and institutional further development of KoKoRu.<sup>12</sup> It can certainly be seen as the product of a more differentiated reflection on ecumenical-theological argumentation - a product of deepened ecumenism<sup>13</sup> - which, unlike KoKoRu, „konfessionelle Perspektiven [...] aus ökumenischer Grundüberzeugung heraus und in didaktischem Interesse in den RU einspielt“.<sup>14</sup>

Based on Article 7, Paragraph 3 of the Basic Law, Hamburg offers religious education for all students (Rufa 2.0),<sup>15</sup> in which the content is now coordinated with the school supervisory authority, the Protestant Church, the Jewish community, the three Islamic religious communities in Hamburg, the Alevi community, and the Catholic Archdiocese. Therefore, in addition to Protestant teachers, Jewish, Muslim, Alevi, and Catholic<sup>16</sup> teachers can also provide religious education, provided they have completed a full course of study and a proper teaching internship.<sup>17</sup>

9 Cf. <https://www.schulministerium.nrw/konfessionelle-kooperation-im-religionsunterricht>.

10 Cf. Vereinbarung\_Kirchen\_mk.pdf (bistum-essen.de).

11 Cf. <https://www.religionsunterricht-in-niedersachsen.de/christlicherRU>.

12 Cf. WOPPOWA, Jan, *Quo Vadis? Aktuelle Modelle des schulischen Religionsunterrichtes im Vergleich*, 144.

13 Cf. Gemeinsam verantworteter Christlicher Religionsunterricht. Ein Positionspapier der Schulreferentinnen und Schulreferenten der evangelischen Kirchen und katholischen Bistümer in Niedersachsen, Hannover, 2021., 9-22.

14 WOPPOWA, Jan, *Quo Vadis? Aktuelle Modelle des schulischen Religionsunterrichtes im Vergleich*, 145.

15 Cf. <https://li.hamburg.de/fortbildung/faecher-lernbereiche/gesellschaft/religion/art-einleitung-583316>.

16 Since spring 2022 with the official participation of the Catholic Church.

17 Cf. <https://www.hamburg.de/bsb/pressemitteilungen/13278536/2019-11-29-bsb-religionsunterricht/>.

A look at the other federal states broadens this spectrum, which is generally based on the Basic Law. Here, however, the leeway of the individual federal states in the concrete implementation becomes apparent. Without being able to discuss all the federal states due to the limited scope of this article, let us highlight some peculiarities that strongly emphasize the current erosion processes and their impact on religious education. Article 141 of the German Basic Law, known as the 'Bremer Klausel', forms the basis for the legal special status of certain federal states, such as Bremen and Berlin. This clause restricts the scope of Article 7, Paragraph 3 of the same Basic Law, in that religious instruction does not have to be a regular subject taught in schools under joint supervision of the state school supervisory authorities and the respective religious communities, provided a different state-specific legal regulation existed on January 1, 1949.<sup>18</sup>

In Berlin, in addition to religious education there is ethics education (Lebenskundeunterricht), with both subjects being voluntary. While the respective religious communities continue to provide religious education, the Humanist Association (Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands) provides ethics education (Lebenskundeunterricht). Over the past decade, there has been an increasing trend in the number of participants in ethics education.<sup>19</sup> In the 2022/23 school year, for the first time, there were 72,347 students participating in ethics education, surpassing the number of participants in corresponding religious education.

The outlined dynamics and developments surrounding religious education in Germany raise the question of its relation to confessional reference. In other words, the different directions that religious education is currently taking in various federal states make the question of confession(s) precarious within the context of religious and ethical concepts, which are already emerging as at least equal offerings in some federal states for various reasons, as mentioned earlier.

This also places the reference science of theology, which constitutes denominational religious education, within the context of competing models that differ, as outlined, on the one hand within denominational references of religious education, and on the other hand also explicitly engage approaches to religious studies.

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18 Cf. MECKEL, Thomas: „Bremer Klausel“, in: HALLERMANN, Heribert – MECKEL, Thomas – DROEGE, Michael – DE WALL, Heinrich (Hg.): *Lexikon für Kirchen- und Religionsrecht*. Consulted online on 23 June 2023 [https://dx.doi.org/10.30965/9783506786371\\_0333](https://dx.doi.org/10.30965/9783506786371_0333).

19 Cf. <https://www.berlin.de/sen/kultgz/religion-und-weltanschauung/religions-und-lebenskundeunterricht/artikel.21588.php>.

Before reflecting on this discourse, we need to take a closer look at the social and school-political framework conditions in Croatia in order to be able to direct the transnational perspective towards the discourse we introduced at the beginning.

## 1.2. Religious Education in Croatia

### 1.2.1. *Croatian religious context*

As is well-known, Croatia is a postcommunist state in which religious education in the school program was forbidden until the 1990s. Religious education was introduced in Croatian schools through the democratizing process in the 1990s, when Croatia had fought to become an independent state from Yugoslavia. Faith and Catholic tradition had often preserved national identity and specifically Croatian culture in the predominantly unitary communist state that had existed in multinational Yugoslavia.<sup>20</sup> So, in the 1990s, religious sensibilities once again became important in social and political life. It should be borne in mind that there were changes in the religious field as well as in Croatian society. On the one hand we can see crisis in the traditional religions and on the other we can see a revitalization of religion in some ways.<sup>21</sup> In the Croatian context, profound cultural, ethical and political changes have taken place, while there have been elements of transition from socialism to democracy. Religiosity in this context can be marked as extensive and traditional. Those two terms explain the core of religiosity in Croatia. Traditional pastoral activity has been dominated by large manifestations such as popular pilgrimages, historical anniversaries, eucharistic congresses, and so on. In these forms of religiosity, the main purpose was to demonstrate power and the number of followers and to deepen national and confessional self-identification. In the context of communist state, the Church emerged as an authentic opposition. However, in the present democratic context this type of pastoral activity may be questioned. The main issue becomes the lack of individual experience and interiorization of religious belief. A consequence of this is that we have unchanged 'believers', untouched by the deep message of the Gospel and its ethical implications.

On the other hand, we are witnessing an expansion of new popular religiosity which is commonly described in terms of experience, individ-

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20 Cf. BALOBAN, Josip, „Uvod“, in: BALOBAN, Josip, *U potrazi za identitetom. Komparativna studija vrednota: Hrvatska i Europa*, 14.

21 Cf. RAZUM, Ružica: *Vjeronauk između tradicije i znakovna vremena*, Zagreb, 2008., 16.

ualism, pragmatism and fickleness.<sup>22</sup> This popular religiosity, especially among young people, can be described as Pentecostalization.<sup>23</sup> There are many Pentecostal elements and manifestations that accommodate themselves in the Croatian traditional Catholic context. Elements of this process of Pentecostalization have emerged throughout the world in various confessional contexts. Its main characteristics are emotivism, individualism, personal experience of faith expressed through classical Pentecostal manifestations such as worship, speaking in tongues, and resting in the Spirit. So, we can say that religiosity in Croatia exists between the former ecclesiality of extensive pastoral care and personal religiosity that does not have a predominantly communal sensibility.<sup>24</sup>

The other element that is exerting an influence on religiosity is globalization.<sup>25</sup> Personal identity, especially among adolescents, is generally fluid and has a mix of cultures and worldviews.<sup>26</sup> The influence of globalization has been manifested principally through the Internet. Young people and also school pupils use smartphones and receive input from all over the world. They can encounter various worldviews and practices and this has an influence on their self-identification.

On the other hand, Croatian identity is constituted by a triple influence: Latin-Mediterranean, Central-European, and Balkan-Oriental.<sup>27</sup> So, we have to say that Croatian identity and culture are polymorphic<sup>28</sup> because of these influences. This has placed Croats between the influence of the Catholic world in the west and the Orthodox and Islamic worlds in the east. Croatian identity and culture has been forged in this context for centuries.

22 Cf. MARDEŠIĆ, Željko, *Rascjep u svetome*, Zagreb, 2007., 435.

23 Cf. KOBYLINSKI, Andrzej, „Suvremeni problemi globalne pentekostalizacije kršćanstva“, *Obnovljeni život* 71,4 (2016.), 435-447.

24 Cf. NIKODEM, Krunoslav - ZRINŠČAK, Siniša, „Između distancirane crkvenosti i intenzivne osobne religioznosti: religijske promjene u hrvatskom društvu od 1999. do 2018. godine“, *Društvena istraživanja* 28,3 (2019.), 371-390.

25 Cf. VOLF, Miroslav, *Flourishing. Why we need religion in globalized world*, Yale, 2017.

26 BARIĆ, Denis, „Identitet adolescenata“, in: MANDARIĆ, Blaženka Valentina - RAZUM, Ružica - BARIĆ, Denis, *Religioznost zagrebačkih adolescenata*, Zagreb, 2019., 20.

27 LOVRENOVIĆ, Ivan, „Hrvati i Bosna“, u: *Ex tenebris. Sarajevski dnevnik*, Zagreb, 1994., 115 - 116.

28 ŠARČEVIĆ, Ivan, *Dijalog iz vjere*, Zagreb, 2021., 215.

According to the last population census,<sup>29</sup> in 2021 in Croatia religious affiliation was as follows: Catholics 78,97 % / Other Christians 4,83 % / Orthodox 3,32 % / Muslims 1,32 % / Protestants 0,26 % / Jews 0,01 % / Oriental religions 0,09 % / Other religions, movements and worldviews 0,96 % / Agnostics and sceptics 1,68 % / Non-religious and atheists 4,71 % / Non-declarative 1,72 % / Unknown 2,14 %

In the 2021 population census we can see a significant number of 'other Christians': roughly 4,83 %. This is the most significant minority among other self-identified members of confessions and religions. It is a new categorization for church social analysts. What does this category of 'other Christians' mean? We can assume that it signifies people who lean towards a Church institution and its representatives. The results of sociological research from 2019<sup>30</sup> show a reduction of trust in the Church as an institution and its active public role. In 1999, 62,8 % of respondents said they trust the Church as an institution. In 2018, only 38,4 % of respondents said they trust the Church.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the number of those who do not have trust at all has rose from 5,1 % in 1999 to 20,8 % in 2018. So, to conclude, self-identification as 'other Christians' can be interpreted as a protest against the institutional Church. These 'other Christians' are mainly Catholics who see themselves as transconfessional Christians who do not need any institution as their self-identifying *locus*. Often, they are discontented with the Church's role in society; and with their self-identification as 'other Christians' they want to make a protest against the dominance of the institutional Catholic Church. We can say that these are some elements of transconfessional, globalized Christianity.

### 1.2.2 Religious Education

For religious education in the Croatian educational system, there are some fundamental laws that arose during the process of democratization in 1990s: Firstly, the State constitution (Ustav) from 1990, then the Agreement between the Republic of Croatia and the Holy See on cooperation in the field of education and culture (1996), the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the Croatian

29 DRŽAVNI ZAVOD ZA STATISTIKU, „Konačni rezultati popisa stanovništva 2021. (22. 9. 2022.)“, u: <https://dzs.gov.hr/vijesti/objavljeni-konacni-rezultati-popisa-2021/1270> (27. 6. 2023.)

30 Cf. NIKODEM, Krunoslav - ZRINŠČAK, Siniša, „Između distancirane crkvenosti i intenzivne osobne religioznosti“, 371-390.

31 Cf. NIKODEM, Krunoslav - ZRINŠČAK, Siniša, „Između distancirane crkvenosti i intenzivne osobne religioznosti“, 377.

Episcopal Conference on religious education in public schools and public pre-schools (1999), the Law on the legal status of religious communities (2002), and agreements between other religious communities and the Government of the Republic of Croatia in the field of common interest (2002 and 2003). Particularly important in terms of religious education are the Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on cooperation in the field of education and culture, and the Agreement on Catholic religious education in public schools and religious education in public preschools, signed by the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the Croatian Episcopal Conference.

After signing the Law on the legal status of religious communities, the Government of the Republic of Croatia signed a Agreement on questions of common interest with the Serbian Orthodox Church (2002), the Islamic religious community (2002), the Evangelical-Lutheran Church (2003), the Reformed Christian Church (2003), the Evangelical Pentecostal Church (2003), the Christian Adventist Church (2003), the Alliance of Baptist Churches (2003), the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (2003), the Macedonian Orthodox Church (2003) and the Croatian Old Catholic Church (2003). According to article 13 of the State constitution, every religious community has the ability to develop religious education in pre-schools and religious teaching in elementary and high schools. Almost every religious community is using this possibility.

There are four main models of religious education: the strictly confessional model of school catechesis, the curricular model, the neutral confessional model and the interdisciplinary model.<sup>32</sup> The strictly confessional model is structured on the faith and theology of one church and religious tradition. In this model the Church is the normative instance of what is Christian.<sup>33</sup> The curricular model is mainly confessional but may reflect the laicity of the school. It is more education *about* faith rather than *in* faith. It helps individuals to manage the reality of faith, in personal life and in the life of the community.<sup>34</sup> The neutral non-confessional model<sup>35</sup> means non-involvement of personal views and positions. It is based on neutral religious science rather than on confessional theology. However, this does not

32 RAZUM, Ružica, *Vjeronauk između tradicije i znakova vremena*, 146.

33 Cf. HEMEL, Ulrich, „Ohrabrenje za život i prenošenje ciljeva religiozne kompetencije školskog vjeronauka danas“, *Kateheza* 22,2 (2000.), 136.

34 Cf. RAZUM, Ružica, *Vjeronauk između tradicije i znakova vremena*, 147.

35 Cf. CUSH, Denise, „Without fear or favour: Forty years of non-confessional and multi-faith religious education in Scandinavia and the UK“, in: *Religious Education in a Plural, Secularised Society. A Paradigm Shift* (2011.), 69-84.

mean that it promotes syncretism or relativism. It helps students to develop their own opinion and view. The interdisciplinary model<sup>36</sup> integrates religious themes in other school subjects, not in a dedicated subject of religious education.

In Croatia there is confessional religious education in various confessional varieties. In its nature it is strictly confessional with its source in the confessional theology of one church. The Croatian word for religious education is *vjeronauk*. It consists of two words, *vjera* i *nauk*, faith and doctrine. It could be said that religious education in Croatia is doctrine of faith. It is often manifested as school catechesis. It can be said that religious education means the presence of the Church in the school; the Church as institution with its soteriological agenda to point to a Christian view and sense of the world. It cannot be said that all teachers of religion teach in the same way. In some cases, there is the strictly confessional model with an accent on Church dogmatic, moral and liturgical norms. On the other hand, there are religion teachers who are more sensitive to the public school community in which they see an opportunity to be present and open to dialogue with students who do not believe or do not practice the Christian faith.

„The Government department for education and culture of the Republic of Croatia has published the programs of some religious communities: the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Islamic community, the Jewish community, the Adventist community, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.”<sup>37</sup> We will shortly review three of them.

Orthodox religious education is approved by the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Lessons are held twice a week in elementary school and once a week in high school, as in the case with Catholic religious education. Teachers of religion are alumni of the Orthodox Theological Faculty and there are about forty of them in Croatia, particularly in the eastern part of the country where there is a larger number of Orthodox believers.

Islamic religious education has been actively present in Croatian schools since 1992, when the Meshihat of the Islamic community signed an agreement with the government, and a government committee drew up a plan and program for Islamic religious education in Croatian schools with the approval of the Meshihat. There are about 47 teachers of Islam in Croatian schools.

36 Cf. ERRICKER, Clive, *Religious education: A conceptual and interdisciplinary approach for secondary level*, New York, 2010.

37 RAZUM, Ružica: *Vjeronauk između tradicije i znakova vremena*, 202.

Evangelical religious education is based on a plan and program that was approved at the beginning of the 1990s. There are two school textbooks for religious education, although these textbooks are non-denominational, which means that teacher of religion can do additional work on denominational diversification. Lessons are held mostly on Saturdays and Sundays in church premises. There are about 16 Evangelical-Pentecostal teachers of religion in Croatia. They are mostly alumni of the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Osijek.

In terms of the number of members of other Christian churches and religions such as Islam, it can be said that Croatia is largely homogeneous. However, this is not to say that there is no need for a deepening of ecumenical and interreligious sensibility and relations. Those who might appear to be on the margins should not be neglected or ignored, as Pope Francis says.

A glance at the figures and data, quickly shows that there is a homogeneous framework of religious affiliation – not least in comparison with Germany. This, however, hides the plurality of religiosity outlined above, and a diffusion in the sphere of religion in Croatia same as in other countries. With different dynamics in Germany and Croatia, the change in the status of religion is significant. This will now be analyzed in the theological context.

## **2. Role and Importance of Theology – Transnational Perspectives**

### **2.1. The Role and importance of theology**

We may seem to be living in a post-Christian<sup>38</sup> or at least in a post-traditional<sup>39</sup> era. This is marked by avoidance of confessional and denominational self-identification, a decline in traditional religious practice, and the introduction of new, popular forms of spirituality and religiosity. We see various aspects of decline in the religious sphere, particularly in the profile of the institutional church: The most significant evidence of this can be found in societal transformations occurring, to varying degrees, in different countries. This is exemplified by changes in the volume of church membership, increasing abandonment of traditions, especially institutionalized Christian traditions, and a growing shift towards religious practice in the private sphere.

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38 Cf. VEITH JR., Gene Edward: *Post-Christian: A Guide of Contemporary Thought and Culture*, New York, 2020.

39 Cf. GRÜMME, Bernhard: *Praxeologie*, Freiburg i. Br., 2021, 167-173.

We are also seeing nostalgia, to a certain extent, among theologians, for the past in general and for former ways of doing theology. We do not propose to undertake a broad examination of theology in crisis in the context of contemporary culture and academic life. It will be enough simply to mention some elements as we have done previously. For example, Bernhard Grümme summarizes in his recently published work on Public Political Theology that theology, as a whole, seems to have paled within societal discourses and public discourse.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, within the limited scope of this article, we cannot undertake such a comprehensive societal analysis, but we can situate the challenges facing theology within the field of religious education. We will do this by delineating theology as a reflective practice rooted in belief in God, in which way it remains compatible with religious education. In the following section, we will endeavor to establish and justify this delineation and relationship.

## 2.2. Theology – a double inquiry?

In light of the aforementioned framework and development dynamics, we might ask in a forthright way whether theology, as a supposedly fading discipline, has any relevance at all for public religious education under present societal conditions. The curricular delineation of theology as a reference discipline for (denominational) religious education, as seen in the example of North Rhine-Westphalia<sup>41</sup>, appears quite dated in this regard.

So, we might ask to what extent theology can still be situated within religious education. This is closely tied to the conceptual question regarding the model of religious education: Is there still a need for denominational affiliation in the practice of religious education?

Consequently, the following considerations are based on, so to speak, a double inquiry: Theology as a reference science of denominational religious education seems to be vigorously challenged in the face of social dynamics. This concerns not only the basic framework of denominational religious education at a time for which the number of non-denominational students is rising, but also theology as a scientific disci-

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40 Cf. GRÜMME, Bernhard: *Öffentliche Politische Theologie*, Freiburg i. Br., 2023, 11-13.

41 Cf. Ministerium für Schule und Bildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen: Kernlehrplan für die Sekundarstufe I. Gymnasium in Nordrhein-Westfalen. Katholische Religionslehre, Düsseldorf, 2019, 9.

pline.<sup>42</sup> Theology is currently exposed to a multitude of inquiries in terms of its scientific-theoretical delineation, and the relationship between theology and (denominational) religious education, such as theology as the reference science of religious education, has been anything but self-evident and unquestioned for several years.<sup>43</sup> This is discussed in both German and Croatian contexts.<sup>44</sup>

### 3. Theology

#### 3.1. Reflection rooted in belief in God

The recently discussed insights on the institutional and educational policy settings regarding the future of religious education as a regular subject in general education have highlighted the fragility and need for clarification of a theological claim within the perspective of denominational or confessional religiosity. To what extent can we still speak of (Catholic) theology as a constitutive and reference discipline<sup>45</sup> of religious education? What understanding of theology precedes such considerations as a premise?

In this context, we will make the case based on an understanding of theology as a reflective practice of confession for the continued establishment of a constitutive theological profile of a future-oriented religious education.

Theology under a scientific claim must prove itself in the public sphere by demonstrating its specific perspective as an inherently public theology within the realm of almost universal discourse.<sup>46</sup> Particularly under the scientific claim to trans-subjectivity, theology as a discipline must also prove itself through argument, and through interdisciplinary and public discourse: „Auch Theologie darf deshalb kein Glaubensaxiom

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42 Cf. WERBICK, Jürgen, *Einführung in die theologische Wissenschaftslehre*, 2010.; VON STOSCH, Klaus, „Theologie als Wissenschaft“, in: *ET studies* 7,1 (2016.), 3-26.

43 Cf. on this religious education discourse fundamentally, METTE, Norbert - SELLMANN, Matthias (Hg.), *Religionsunterricht als Ort der Theologie*, Freiburg i. Br., 2012.; SCHLAG, Thomas - SUHNER, Jasmine (Hg.), *Theologie als Herausforderung religiöser Bildung. Bildungstheoretische Orientierungen zur Theologizität der Religionspädagogik*, Stuttgart, 2017.

44 Cf. BARIĆ, Denis, „Institut religijskih znanosti: o 60. obljetnici u svjetlu promjena u hrvatskom crkvenom i društvenom kontekstu“, *Bogoslovska smotra* 93,1 (2023.), 59-74.

45 Cf. Kernlehrplan für die Sekundarstufe I Gymnasium in Nordrhein-Westfalen. Katholische Religionslehre, Düsseldorf, 2019, 9.

46 Cf. VON STOSCH, Klaus, „Theologie als Wissenschaft“, in: *ET studies* 7,1 (2016.), 8.

gegen Kritik immunisieren und muss auch die wichtigsten Glaubensaussagen immer neu im Diskurs bewähren.“<sup>47</sup>

Theology under such a scientific claim must therefore be profiled in an interdisciplinary manner as well as contextually. θεός and λόγος refer here first of all to the (etymological) roots of a practiced connection between the dimensions ‘God’ and ‘language’.<sup>48</sup> Theology is then a reflection of religious practice insofar as religion is to be understood as a system of meaning with reference to transcendence, as a resource of meaning that is available to human beings in relation to an unconditional and ultimate interpretation of self and the world in which we live.<sup>49</sup> The initially abstract reference to transcendence as a constitutive element of religious practice is realized in a Christian perspective in a historical-personal way. Christian theology therefore does not take an arbitrary standpoint, but begins (in a certain position-sensitive way) with the translation of man’s reference to an unconditional – as man’s relationship with the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. Consequently, the elementary transfer consists in the historically-personally conditioned dynamic from the indeterminate (*an* unconditioned, unavailable etc.) to the definite article (*the* revealing God).

This contextualization of theology reveals the essential moment of a perspective that participates in this process:

Wenn Theologie zutreffend als Hermeneutik des Glaubens erfasst ist, muss es immer auch darum gehen, den Glauben als Glauben zu bedenken, also die für einen religiösen Glauben konstitutive Beteiligtenperspektive zu beobachten. Dadurch wird die optionale Dimension des Glaubens deutlich. Gegenstand theologischer Reflexion ist ein Bekenntnis, d. h. der persönliche, unververtretbare Vollzug eines Subjekts bzw. einer Gemeinschaft, das bzw. die sich in Freiheit Gott anvertraut und ihr Leben auf Gottes ‘Option’ für den Menschen gründet.<sup>50</sup>

47 VON STOSCH, Klaus: „Theologie als Wissenschaft“, in: *ET studies* 7,1 (2016.), 8-9.

48 Cf. SECKLER, Max, „Theologiein. Eine Grundidee in dreifacher Ausgestaltung: zur Theorie der Theologie und zur Kritik der monokausalen Theologiebegründung“, *Theologische Quartalschrift* 163,4 (1983.), 250.

49 Cf. KÖNEMANN, Judith, „Art. Religion“, in: *WiReLex* (2015.), 5: „Religion stellt ein klassisches Sinndeutungssystem mit Transzendenzbezug dar, sie ist eine Sinnressource, die dem Menschen in Bezug auf ein Unbedingtes, auf Letztgültiges, auf Selbst- und Weltdeutung für sein Leben zur Verfügung stellt [...]“

50 KNOP, Julia, „Hermeneutik des geglaubten Gottes. Zum Verhältnis von Glaube und Reflexion in wissenschaftlicher Theologie“, in: KIRSCHNER, Martin (Hg.), *Dialog und Konflikt: Erkundungen zu Orten theologischer Erkenntnis*, Ostfildern, 2017., 237.

On the basis of a linguistic-pragmatic-analytical approach, Julia Knop differentiates in this regard between concrete speech acts of God-speech on the levels of faith performance (*theologia prima*) and (scientific) reflection performance (*theologia secunda*). In the primarily confessing performance of faith, a certain understanding of God and above all a certain relationship to God is expressed performatively and affirmatively. The worshipper acts from the position of a participant, be it the active speaker or the conscious listener.<sup>51</sup> On the level of scientific reflection, on the other hand, the perspective of the participant and the underlying confession are reflected: „Theologie bedenkt daher im Kern immer eine Relation, die in einem entsprechenden Bekenntnis Gestalt gewinnt.“<sup>52</sup> This is an elementary determination of the modes of faith and scientific reflection outlined above, both of which basically deal with reality sub ratione fidei, albeit in different formats: „Glaubensrede bekennt, während theologische Rede bedenkt.“<sup>53</sup>

To do theology in a context-sensitive way in the face of the challenges of late-modern transformation processes would mean to consider the confession of performative as well as affirmative faith speech. In this context, theology is contextually located as the basic idea of speaking of God (or several gods), which is addressed etymologically above and initially remains abstract. It then evolves into a contemplation of the God revealed through Jesus Christ, rooted in the foundations of Christianity. Doing theology with such a foundation would mean reflecting on a historical-personal God-human relationship that derives its normativity from a claim to truth, and that contours this truth as a universal truth based on love derived from God.<sup>54</sup>

### 3.2. Contextual theology as a process of reflection – still needed in schools?

Can the above outlines of an understanding of theology as a practice of reflection be transferred to religious education in the context of cur-

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51 Cf. Ibid., 236.

52 KNOP, Julia: „*Scientia fidei* – Glaubenswissenschaft. Aufgaben- und Bedingungsfelder systematischer Theologie“, in: KIRSCHNER, Martin (Hg.), *Dialog und Konflikt*, 138.

53 KNOP, Julia: „Hermeneutik des geglaubten Gottes“, in: KIRSCHNER, Martin (Hg.), *Dialog und Konflikt*, 236.

54 Cf. GRÜMME, Bernhard, „Wie viel und welche Theologie braucht der Religionsunterricht? Anmerkungen zur Relevanz und zum Profil der Theologie in der Religionspädagogik“, in: *ET studies* 12,2 (2021.), 288.

rent social and institutional transformation dynamics? The perspectives on theology that have just been raised revolve first and foremost around a scientific-theoretical foundation that clearly locates theology in the field of the sciences, proving, so to speak, that theology does not necessarily have to fall silent in the public sphere of the sciences. But to what extent can such a contouring of theology as a practice of reflection founded on academic credentials still be relevant for religious education, which is currently undergoing existential processes of change at the institutional level – as shown above – and at the level of content. Thus, it is not uncommon for research in religious education to show a tendency towards religious education that is primarily based on the accents of religious studies and can be grouped under the guiding idea of the objectification (*Versachkundlichung*) of religious education.<sup>55</sup>

To put it somewhat bluntly: Is there something like a ‘light version’ of such a theology in religious education; are there new transformations of theology, gradual gradations or even an equivalence to the demands on scientific theology as the reflection of a confession? Can religious education itself be profiled as a place of theological knowledge under the premise of the above approach to theology?

Markus Knapp, referring to the loci systematics, sees religious education as a testing ground for the findings of scientific theology.<sup>56</sup> In this field of probation, an attempt is made to interpret theological statements in relation to the life world of children and young people and to make them understandable.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, religious education would not be a place of theological knowledge, but rather a theologically productive place<sup>58</sup> where reflection on a confession under the claim of first reference is made possible.

55 Cf. SCHWEITZER, Friedrich, „Das Theologische der Religionspädagogik. Grundfragen und Herausforderungen“, in: SCHLAG, Thomas - SUHNER, Jasmine (Hg.), *Theologie als Herausforderung religiöser Bildung. Bildungstheoretische Orientierungen zur Theologizität der Religionspädagogik*, Stuttgart, 2017 (= Religionspädagogik innovativ 17), 13; ENGLERT, Rudolf, „Das Theologische der Religionspädagogik. Grundfragen und Herausforderungen“, in: SCHLAG, Thomas; - SUHNER, Jasmine (Hg.), *Theologie als Herausforderung religiöser Bildung*, 28–29.

56 Cf. KNAPP, Markus, „Das Wort Gottes, seine Überlieferung und Erkenntnis. Die Lehre von den *loci theologici*“, in: METTE, Norbert - SELLMANN, Matthias (Hg.), *Religionsunterricht als Ort der Theologie*, Freiburg i. Br., 2012., 49.

57 Cf. Ibid.

58 Cf. SCHAMBECK, Mirjam, „Was das Theologisieren mit Kindern über das Geschäft der (Praktischen) Theologie und das Verständnis des Religionsunterrichts verrät. Bausteine einer Wissenschaftstheorie“, in: METTE, Norbert - SELLMANN, Matthias (Hg.), *Religionsunterricht als Ort der Theologie*, Freiburg i. Br., 2012 (= *Quaestiones Disputatae* 247), 273.

Insofar as this is an option of confession, it requires a (critical) distance of reflection that takes seriously the performative and affirmative confession of faith and points to its particularity *qua* optionality. Personal faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ is a possible, reasonable system of interpretation.<sup>59</sup>

In this respect, religious education would not be a theological place where „Glaube geschieht, weil etwas als Offenbarung geglaubt (bezeugt) wird“. <sup>60</sup> However, it is by no means a ‘theology-free zone’<sup>61</sup>, but rather a place that is to a certain extent productive of theology, for which theology acts as a ‘qualified interpreter’,<sup>62</sup> also as a counterpart of to affirmative acts of faith, which considers the statement, the subject, the form and the claim to validity of elements of faith contents that emerge within the structure of performative places of faith.<sup>63</sup> The decisive factor here appears to be the reference to (Christian) faith, for which both the confessional character and the claim to validity must be explicitly named and seriously played into the interdisciplinary and social discourse.<sup>64</sup>

Accentuated in this way, a theological claim can remain valid for a sustainable concept of religious education and mark the necessary context sensitivity of this concept. On this basis, religious education could examine the broad scope of belief in a God who reveals himself to human beings,<sup>65</sup> whose claim to truth is fed by God’s universal love and devotion for humanity revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>66</sup>

At present, many questions are being raised against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. In the light of this, religious education can specifically ask about the genuine contribution of the Christian perspective of a believed God, for example, to the discourse on peace.<sup>67</sup>

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59 Cf. Ibid., 271.

60 KNOP, Julia, „Hermeneutik des geglaubten Gottes“, in: KIRSCHNER, Martin (Hg.), *Dialog und Konflikt*, 240.

61 Cf. KNAPP, „Das Wort Gottes, seine Überlieferung und Erkenntnis“, 49.

62 Cf. KNOP: „Hermeneutik des geglaubten Gottes“, 240.

63 Cf. Ibid.

64 Cf. Ibid., 240-241.

65 Cf. DE BYL, Marius, „Religious Education as a Space for Peace? Peace-Theological Impulses for Context-Sensitive Religious Education“ in: GOMES, Tiago de Fraga - GRÜMME, Bernhard - DA SILVA, Aline Amaro (Hg.), *Justiça e Paz. Desafios Teológicos - Festschrift em homenagem ao professor Erico João Hammes*, Porto Algere, 2023., 141.

66 GRÜMME, Bernhard, „Wie viel und welche Theologie braucht der Religionsunterricht?“, 288.

67 Cf. DE BYL, Marius, „Religious Education as A Space for Peace?“, 141-146.

#### **4. Sustainable religious education - from a transnational perspective**

Through this short transnational study, we can see a variety of religious conditions and contexts and ways of conducting religious education. There are a number of specific elements and peculiarities in the German and Croatian context.

All in all, it could be said that, with gradual differentiation in relation to the regional context, non-denominationalism has long been part of the social terrain of religious plurality. In Germany, differences in the area of concrete religious affiliation etc. can be seen within the various federal states, as explained above. In Croatia, a different picture can be drawn on the basis of the statistics. This picture is characterized by high membership figures and, to a certain extent, framework conditions for denominational religious education that remain relatively homogenous. From a trans-national perspective in the truest sense, however, it has become apparent that these superficial assumptions mask transformation and diffusion dynamics that re-accentuate tradition, religion and religiosity in the face of increasing heterogeneity and individualization. There are processes of globalization that intensify a sense of pluralistic society in which not only are there people of diverse religious orientations but people whose orientation is confessionally indifferent. These trends are, as noted above, much more significant in Germany, but they also affect younger population groups in Croatia. From the perspective examined in this article, the necessity of a differentiated, context- and location-sensitive view becomes apparent.

In the overall global context, society can be characterized as post-confessional, post-traditional and pluralistic.<sup>68</sup> In such a society we need to take a number of things into account:

1) Transnational and publicly non-confessional society: When we use the term transnational we are not saying that national orientations are no longer diverse. However, the borders of national orientations have become less clear, and discourse – including discourse in the religious sphere – is increasingly facilitated through global and above all digital networks, such as the international research cooperation between the universities in Bochum and Zagreb that preceded this article. When we say that our society is publicly non-confessional we are not suggesting that

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68 Cf. MIKELATOU, Angeliki - ARVANITIS, Eugenia, „Pluralistic and equitable education in the neoliberal era: paradoxes and contradictions“, in: *International Journal of Inclusive Education* (2021.), 1-16.

confessional identity is no longer an influence: we are saying that this influence takes into account the plural dynamics of individual differentiations of religiosity even beyond denominational frameworks and identities. Religious education maps this social reality in a school-institutional context that continues into the public sphere. As a consequence, religious education has to be based on dialog in two ways. On the one hand, we should be aware of the nature of a changing society and the challenges it may pose as well as the opportunities it may offer; on the other hand, we should be alert to the questions that are raised by participants in religious education from highly different points of view.<sup>69</sup> Religious education can be understood as a place that allows for critical reflection on a belief option while thinking in a fundamental way. It should be structured to enable position-sensitive translations.<sup>70</sup> So, by the principle of Tillich's theology correlation<sup>71</sup> we have to construct our theology and religious education to provide answers to the inquiries posed by interlocutors, drawing upon their lived experiences within the societies as mentioned above.

2) Fractured interreligiosity: Religious education has to involve more interreligious elements – taking into account those social transformation dynamics that include all forms of closeness to and distance from religion. In this respect, interreligiousness must be thought of as broken and at the same time while being adapted to meet the demands of new circumstances at the same time. For the practice of religious education, this means that interreligious multi-perspectivity should be incorporated in lessons in such a way that, on the one hand, the complexity of individual approaches to the sphere of religion, which, as shown above, is not only a matter of formal affiliation to a religious community or no affiliation at all, is taken into account, and, on the other hand, that encounters between religions are not compromised by encroachment, for example in relation to the appointment of individual pupils as experts of a particular religion. What is indisputable, however, is that experiential encounter remains a key factor of interreligious learning. Exchange in this regard, which can be enriched at the institutional level through cooperation with the respective religious

69 LEIMGRUBER, Stephan, „Ekumensko učenje“, u: HILGER, Georg - LEIMGRUBER, Stephan - ZIEBERTZ, Hans-Georg (Hg.), *Vjeronaučna didaktika*, Zagreb, 2009., 383.

70 Cf. DE BYL, Marius, „Religionslehrer\*innen als Übersetzer\*innen? Impulse für eine kontextsensible Thematisierung von Humanität im Religionsunterricht“ in: ANUS-IEWICZ-BAER, Sandra - HILD, Christian - MASSUD, Abdel-Hafiez (Hg.), *Humanität als religionspädagogisches und -didaktisches Leitmotiv* (RKBG III), Stuttgart, 2023., 42-44.

71 Cf. ZALAR, Đuro, „Korelacija kao sustavno-teološko i religiozno-pedagoško načelo“, *Bogoslovska smotra*, 75,1 (2005.), 273-288.

communities, must critically reflect on the implications of the social fragmentation described above.

3) Theological integrity: We have to say that our religious education must not overlook the valid considerations presented by theology. We cannot conduct religious education in elementary and high schools without theology and its central subject matter – which is God and everything else in relation to God (Thomas Aquinas) or the knowledge of God and ourselves (Martin Luther and Jean Calvin) or the world as the home of God. Nor can we ignore the role of theological instruction that moves hearts and changes the world. We argue that the practice of religious education here requires a specific approach that can first think and critically reflect on the optionality of confessional belief and the potential of this belief. A purely comparative approach to religious studies cannot unfold this potential in such a primary-referential way. Religious education teachers should foster transparent positionality<sup>72</sup> as authentic witnesses of their faith. This requires theological competence in the sense developed above.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has reflected on religious education practice in Germany and Croatia against the backdrop of a joint research cooperation from a transnational perspective. Contrasts and differences, but also similarities, have been revealed, especially with regard to social transformation dynamics among younger population groups. Theology seems to have declined somewhat both as a scientific discipline and in relation to religious education as a reference science. This paper has attempted to profile theology as a reflective practice that can continue to prove itself capable of contributing in a critical way in the public discourse of which religious education is a part.

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72 Cf. <https://www.schulministerium.nrw/religionsunterricht-nordrhein-westfalen-zukunftsfaehig-gestalten#:~:text=Mehr%20denn%20je%20bedarf%20es%20also%20heute%20einer,die%20Entwicklung%20eines%20eigenen%20pers%C3%B6nlichen%20Standpunkts%20nicht%20verhindert:„Indem die Lehrperson als existentiell verwickeltes ‘role model’ für das einsteht, was sie vermittelt, ermöglicht sie den Schülerinnen und Schülern, sich mit der religiösen Position auseinanderzusetzen und auf diese Weise zustimmend oder ablehnend selbstbestimmt ihre eigene Position zu entwickeln. Mehr denn je bedarf es also heute einer ‚transparenten Positionalität‘, die sich neben den konfessionellen Lehrinhalten vor allem auf die erkennbare Haltung und den Standpunkt der Lehrkräfte bezieht.“> On positionality, cf. for example LORENZEN, Stefanie, „Positionierung im Religionsunterricht, interreligiös“, in WiReLex.

Despite the local differences, the common transnational view has been able to show that the denominational aspect of religious education is being widely questioned. This brings into question the theological integrity and positionality of religious education. In the above-mentioned assessment of the present situation, this paper proposes developing an approach in which theology is presented as a critically distanced mechanism for reflection on the confession of the God believed in, which can thus be localized as a reference science within religious education, enabling such positionality. The first outlines have been sketched here and it will certainly be necessary to deepen this project initiative. This applies especially to the development of more far-reaching (transnational) perspectives for action in response to evolving circumstances.

## TEOLOGIJA: JOŠ UVIJEK POTREBNA U ŠKOLAMA? VJERSKI ODGOJ U HRVATSKOJ I NJEMAČKOJ

### Sažetak

*Ovaj prilog donosi pregled uvjeta koji oblikuju vjeronauk u Njemačkoj i Hrvatskoj. Poseban naglasak stavlja se na održivost predmeta koji se trenutačno nalazi pod povećalom brojnih upita o vlastitom identitetu. Cilj je otvoriti perspektive koje razmatraju transnacionalno širenje vjeronaučne nastave. Teologija, kao referentna disciplina vjeronauka, kritički se preispituje u svojoj ulozi, ali se i ponovno ističe kao praksa refleksije, te se unutar vjeronaučne nastave pozicionira na novi način. Time se želi promicati vjeronauk usmjeren prema budućnosti i temeljen na dijalogu.*

**Ključne riječi:** *vjeronauk, teološka refleksija, pluralizam u društvu, Hrvatska, Njemačka*