

# Communication Possibilities in Religious Pedagogy: The Austrian Protestant Diaspora in Times of Media Networking

Moritz Stroh

([moritz.johanns.stroh@univie.ac.at](mailto:moritz.johanns.stroh@univie.ac.at))

## 1. Introduction – two observations

What would Vienna be without its coffee shops? I am in one of those cafes on the “Ringstraße”, deeply involved in a conversation. At the next table a person is talking to someone as well, at least according to her expressions and gestures, but to whom and why?

In front of her is a laptop, the secret is disclosed: Skype and webcam are the key to her communication. The exclusiveness of face-to-face communication is broadened by the possibility of virtual reality. The digital world has found its way into coffee shops.

Two primary school children are sitting in front of a computer. They are trying out Google for the first time, searching for pictures and texts. Supervised by a teacher they are allowed to try out new things. Soon they find information about the topic “horse” and they like it a lot. A bit later they find pictures about “Michael Jackson” and they are shocked. The two students approach the teacher and discuss their horror.

*Thesis:*

These two examples of daily communication can show us how natural the digital world has become for people of all age groups. At the same time we need clear borders – especially for teenagers. The process of talking and communication with the goal of mutual action can be furthered through the use of virtual reality.

## 2. Abstract of the talk

In Austria, Protestants live in a society mainly shaped by Roman Catholicism. Protestants live under the condition of diaspora. The *historical background* explains the development of this

situation – especially according to the situation of Protestant Religious Education nowadays.

In the educational field, methods of communication are of major importance for the cooperation between students and school administration. The question must be posed: what kind of help can be offered by digital connections (networks) and what potential dangers may be hidden in virtual realities? Methods of communication may have a lasting effect on processes in areas where society, the school system, the church and the school subject, “Protestant Religion,” overlap.

## 3. The term “diaspora“

The Greek term “diaspora“ originally means scattering and dispersion. It refers to the Jewish diaspora, Jewish people who live scattered in the Mediterranean area. In the context of the Bible, Paul used the term for Judeo-Christian or Christian minorities and church communities, which live in diaspora.

Today diaspora applies to religious minorities living in a country with a different religious majority, e.g. Austria, being mainly Roman Catholic. Approximately four per cent of the Austrian population belongs to the Protestant church (approx. 330,000 members).

## 4. Historical development – the beginning of Protestant life in Austria

The reformation as an intellectual and spiritual renewal movement would have been impossible without Johannes Gutenberg, who introduced modern book printing. In doing so, Martin Luther’s writings were spread all over Austria. The term “evangelic” is inseparable from the name of Martin Luther and implies the rediscovery

ery of the “Good News,” the New Testament. It’s important for all people to be able to read the stories of the Bible. Therefore, the freedom of conscience of each individual has highest priority and must be acknowledged. For this reason the Bible was translated from the original Hebrew and Greek texts, and not from Latin, into German. In 1522 the German translation of the New Testament was finished. In 1534, the entire Bible was translated.

In Austria, it was the beginning of an active Protestant life, including protestant preachers and its own school system. Via mail the Austrians kept in touch with Martin Luther in Wittenberg. In 1498/99, Huldrych Zwingli, one of the most important reformers of German speaking Switzerland, studied at the University of Vienna. (Born 1484; he died 1531. He was killed [quartered] in battle at the age of 47.)

The “Loosdorfer school rules,” published by Lower Austrian nobility, are classic examples of the attempt to develop Protestant Education. The church services are discussed in a separate agenda (“Chyträusagenda”). The majority of Austria was sympathetic to Protestantism at that time. The development of a structure for the Protestant national church was impossible due to lack of power. Initial attempts were stopped during the counter-reformation. From 1520 onwards, Protestants were persecuted, being turned over to the inquisition and killed.

During the counter-reformation, Protestants in alpine regions were either forced to leave the country or to reconvert to the Roman Catholic Church and fully accept their teachings (e.g. expulsions from several regions of Austria: Salzburg, Defreggental and Zillertal). An example for the persecution of this heresy in the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church can be found in a painting on the dome of St. Charles’s Church in Vienna: Martin Luther is displayed surrounded by thunderclouds, writing a biblical text. This text falls into hell and an angel sets fire to it.

The response to this persecution was a period of secret Protestantism. Protestant life was secret and hidden, with high personal danger, and at the risk of one’s own life.

*Thesis:*

The invention of modern book printing was an educational revolution. Suddenly new ways of education were possible for all members of society. In this ‘Zeitgeist’ (spirit of the age), the reformation came to be. Today’s networking through a digital basis is similar: new media makes communication faster and personal individuality possible. The question remains: who’s taking advantage of it?

#### *4.1. Historical development – on the way to equality and acceptance*

The year 1781 was a turning point for Protestantism in Austria. Joseph II enabled the tolerance of non-Catholic religious minorities, e.g. Lutheran and Reformed Protestants. The Edict of Tolerance didn’t bring equality, but was the first step in the right direction on the way to the “Protestantengesetz” (Protestant's law) 1961.

During this first period of tolerance, education was closely connected with the foundation of Protestantism. Examples include the so-called “tower schools” in Burgenland. Some villages built schools in towers instead of churches or religious meeting houses. Classes took place during the week. Church services were held on Sundays.

For the land reclamation of inner alpine valleys (logging), Protestant lumberjacks were hired. They, too, wanted both: education and church. Reading and writing skills became basic requirements for the Protestant life.

Finally the “Protestantengesetz” brought full acceptance by the state and a regulation of religious education in Austrian public schools (slogan: “free church in a free state”). In comparison, Islam was awarded state recognition in 1912, LDS Church in 1955, and Jehovah’s Witnesses just recently in 2010.

*Thesis:*

On the long path to equal rights, communication and education have been constitutive components. Education processes through communication are the basis of Protestant iden-

tity, not as a borderline, but as an interoperable opening for new dialogues. A broader range of rhetorical and communicative competences are enabled by digital media.

## 5. Structure of Protestant religious education

Members of official religions must be registered as such. All churches and religious communities which are recognised by the state, have the right to Religious Education funded by the government. The details are regulated by the law of Religious Education (“Religionsunterrichtsgesetz”).

The curriculum for Protestant Religious Education in various types of schools is made by the church and authorized by the state. These curricula are centered around the individual’s own critical self-reflection of his/her own personal religious experience.

The state enables and funds Protestant Religious Education. Teacher training and teacher’s appointments are organized by the church. The education officers of the church are responsible for the content taught; organizational problems concern the head offices at school. Religious Education is compulsory for members of the respective church or publicly recognized religious communities. Within the first five days of a new school year, it is possible to drop the subject. While students under 14 need the permission and signature of their parents to deregister, older students are considered religiously mature enough to make their own decision. Students who are not members of any recognized religion are allowed to attend Religious Education classes.

A minimum of three students means a paid lesson; when a group exceed nine students, a second period per week is funded. Because of this, a teacher only knows five days after school begins how many periods he/she will be teaching and with how many students. The ideal situation enables religion lessons within a grade level. In the worst case, students of different ages and grade levels are put together. The lessons are held either first thing in the morning or in the evening. Naturally, it is possible to do the graduation exams (“Matura”) in Religious Education

and to write a scientific paper in lieu of one of the final exams.

*Thesis:*

Protestant Religious Education cannot ignore the topic of digital networking. It is a useful research source for Protestant students and for applying certain topics of the syllabus. Digital networking can’t replace face-to-face contact as the most important communication tool with school administration and students.

## 6. Methods of rhetorical communication and digital networking in connection with Religious Education at school

### 6.1. Meeting students

For the teacher, it is important to interest students enough so that they will not deregister from Religious Education, and at the same time, to win the interest of students who are unaffiliated with religious denominations. Personal conversations can help. Therefore, the first days of a school year are like an advertising campaign for Religious Education.

In all Religious Education situations, careful planning regarding topics needs to be taken into consideration. A case in point would be the fact that the topics discussed will be different for thirteen-year-old teenagers compared to grown up students in an evening school, which has been noted by developmental psychologists.

Here it is necessary to involve topics of religious education in an assuring – not persuasive way – and to keep up the acceptance and appreciation for the student at the same time. If this works there will be lots of possibilities for communicative lessons involving critical thinking.

One successful example: A young woman who attends my class wanted to know the meaning of “evangelic.” At first I didn’t give her an answer. Instead, I asked her what motivated her to attend Protestant Religious Education. She started telling me about her life. In the following years, the young woman wasn’t in my class an-

ymore. One year before the general qualification for university entrance (Matura), she returned. Full of enthusiasm she told me that I was the only teacher who took her seriously as a person. As a consequence, she did the final oral exam in Religion and we worked on religious topics from a Protestant point of view. Later she asked me to conduct her wedding ceremony and to baptise her first child. The quality of personal dialogues and relationship skills as the basis for rhetorical communication opens the door to successful teaching and continuing student interest and participation in Religious Education.

Since the groups of students are rather small in Protestant Religious Education, it is even possible to communicate via e-mail. This form of communication is useful for the preparation of student talks concerning grades and final exams.

By now, all schools in Austria have their own websites. If it is possible to present Protestant Religious Education there (e.g. topics, details about the teacher in charge, etc.), it would be good publicity for the subject. Personal communication can be supplemented by the digital world. The digital network makes information accessible in advance prior to face-to-face communication in class. Some schools operate already that way; very often it is still in the beginning phase.

During classroom time, work on computers and Internet research are possible. Often the students want to go to the computer lab. Religious Education is a place to practice responsibility and freedom or in the words of the Apostle Paul "law and Good News" ("Gesetz und Evangelium").

Students should find out for themselves what they are able to do and which sites on the Net they understand and find useful. However, there are some taboo topics such as, pornographic, sexist, and Nazi topics; these should be forbidden.

The result of such a lesson is that students learn how to handle search engines. They get trained in doing research about religious topics on the Net under the guidance of a teacher. If pupils come across a webpage that is disgusting

or inappropriate, the teacher has to intervene. Students feel as though they are being taken seriously. The religious topics with reference to "law and Good News" can be integrated into the personal horizon of experience.

## *6.2 Encounter with school administration*

Especially in technical schools, the Religious Education classes are viewed critically. Though the legal situation is clear, Religious Education is not integrated into daily school routine. In this case a very sensitive way of communicating is necessary to awaken solidarity amongst principals and colleagues. Communication is taking place through digital networking, exchange of information, time planning, time tables, e-learning and entering grades (into grids).

The timetable for Protestant Religion is set after the definite number of students is fixed. The general timetable has already been fixed by that time. The job of the Religious Education teacher is to intervene in a sensitive way to make sure that Religious Education is not always scheduled in the first and last periods. The same thing applies for school services and inter-religious celebrations.

Teachers of Religious Education are also very often needed in crisis situations at school. For example, in emergency situations such as in the event of death or drug abuse, competences like listening attentively and being able to conduct a conversation are required. Digital networking does not work in cases like these. It is only one way of exchanging less personal and emotional information.

Another example shows the importance of communicative networking as a secondary form of communication connected with E-media: a practical example is "Evening High School for Employed People" in one quarter of Vienna. There is very little interest in Religious Education; the number of students is continuously dropping. I decided to stop working at that school and sought a meeting with the principal. My aim was to hand back in the keys and quit my job at that school. After a long talk, I decided to stay at the school and I became a form teacher. In addition to that, I am participating in a

school pilot project to establish “Rhetoric and Communication” as a school subject. Further developments include articles about Religious Education laws in some school publications and the launch of a church related homepage.

### *6.3 Meeting with church school authorities and further teacher training*

A few years ago it was a difficult process to assign teachers to schools: letters and never ending discussions during staff meetings were needed. For this process the world of E-media is a great advantage. Ready made word documents and PDF-files make the information and the assignment to schools more transparent and exact. E-mails and adequate websites enable a better and faster exchange of information between church, school and society. Newsletters play an important role as well: information can be passed on to all colleagues within a certain period of time.

The program and applications for further teacher trainings for teachers of Religious Education was shifted to a digital and electronic system. The trainings for mentor teachers work with e-learning, online learning tools, e.g. Moodle platforms to supplement course material. Tasks can be accomplished in group work and within peer groups.

#### *Thesis:*

Successful communication in school is dependant upon open dialogues between the people involved. Therefore, attentiveness and esteem are required. Especially in the situation of a religious minority like the Protestants in Austria, this type of open communication might become a starting point to move beyond just being tolerated towards equality and cooperative teamwork concerning school life.

With digital networking it is possible to achieve sustained success, if respect and appreciation during the communicative process (“analog and digital” in a manner of speaking) can be felt by all participants.

## **7. Digital networking as improvement of the quality of Religious Education**

### *7.1 At each school*

The starting point is a school’s website. Introductions to Religious Education can show a short abstract including topics and methods. The Protestant Secondary School Donaustadt includes a picture and a short biography of the teacher there. In doing so, personal experience lowers inhibitions and can help enable successful communication.

There is a variety of possibilities for varied usage of digital networking in Religious Education. Online links could connect texts from the Bible, the Koran, and the Torah about interreligious topics. Articles from Christian Religious Education classes could be linked, in the sense of ecumenism, on the website. This could not only be used to explain the denom-inational separation of students, but all the opportunities for team teaching and cooperation in class, e.g. religious texts and pictures for meditation could be put on the website.

In addition, online platforms could be set up for students, in which small groups could work on religious topics within their grade level. The results of these projects could be displayed as well. The “news” section on the home page could be used for publicizing recent events and projects in Religious Education. The decision to take part in social networking has to be made by each individual teacher based on her/his personal opinions.

While participation in the digital network broadens the communicative spectrum, it also opens the door to misuse.

### *7.2 School authorities and teachers*

There are official documents and teaching requirements provided by the Austrian state. There are also prerequisites for Religious Education. Here it would be helpful to link these two aspects, e.g. a separate homepage with the corresponding legal documents, curricula and teaching materials. Additionally, a list of all Religious Education teachers and the schools they work at could be provided, thus minimizing the

time spent searching for telephone numbers and e-mail addresses.

Such a digital connection could be linked to the official homepage of the Protestant Church in Austria. This could focus on swapping teaching ideas and teaching materials throughout Austria.

Teachers of Religious Education need to be able to communicate with their colleagues in a safe forum, e.g. a 'Coffee House' on a Moodle-platform. In addition to a monthly exchange, the digital connection would offer a secure area to discuss their emotions.

Additional aspects that should be mentioned are the terms "crisis" and "emergency" in a school context. This could develop into an "emergency data base" where a short summary of specific situations and possible responses is available. This could include bullying, death or questions about rituals found in schools. In dealing with such difficult questions, it is important that both digital communication and further teacher training opportunities are offered. The issues of rhetorical communication and digital communication must be connected here.

Another aspect is teacher training, for which the choices and offers of different institutions are

communicated and connected digitally as well. For those teachers who did not have any computer science courses at school and have to acquire computer skills on their own, it would be a sensible investment to provide teacher-training courses for them in the direction of the "European Computer Driving Licence (ICDL)."

## Conclusion

Rhetoric and communication are essential tools for a religious minority in diaspora in relation to the interaction between schools, church and society. The requirements for communication skills are very high in the everyday running of schools. This model gives teachers of Religious Education the necessary inner strength to be able to deal with the great need for mobility and flexibility in schools. Digital communication and concepts of rhetoric and communication connect themselves to a necessary addition: on the one hand, it is necessary for Religious Education teachers to connect more closely; on the other hand, central pieces of information are accessible more easily. The hunger for education seen in the reformation period continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: communication and connections via media can thus be seen as a new reformatory stimulus in the area of Protestant Religious Education in Austria.

## References:

- BARTH, H.M. 2009: *Die Theologie Martin Luthers – Eine kritische Würdigung*, Gueterlsoh (*The Theology of Martin Luther*)
- GERHARD Z. 2008: *Bildungsstandards in der Praxis*, Seelze (*Level of Education in Practice*)
- [http://www.kirchen.net/upload/6954\\_d1-RelUG.pdf](http://www.kirchen.net/upload/6954_d1-RelUG.pdf) (Austrian Religious Education Act)
- <http://www.oepu-noe.at/recht/lp> (Teaching Curricula for Protestant Religion)
- KIRCHHOFF, I., ET AL. (eds.) 2010: *RELi + wir*. Goettingen
- LEEB, R., ET AL. (eds.) 2010: *Renaissance und Reformation – Oberoesterreichische*

- Landesausstellung, 2010*, Linz
- LOESCHE, G. 1930: *Geschichte des Protestantismus im vormaligen und im neuen Oesterreich*, Leipzig. (*History of Protestantism in early and today's Austria*)
- OBST, G. 2010: *Kompetenzorientiertes Lehren und Lernen im Religionsunterricht*, Goettingen
- REINGRABNER, G. 1983: *Evangelisch in Pinkafeld – Die Geschichte der evangelischen Pfarrgemeinde*. Pinkafeld. (*Being Protestant in Pinkafeld: History of the Protestant Parish Pinkafeld*)
- [www.evangel.at](http://www.evangel.at) (official Homepage of the Protestant Church of Austria)