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Building Religious Linguistic and Communication Competences. Religious Literacy in Orthodox Religious Education in Germany

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Abstract

Religious literacy in Orthodox Religious Education in Germany is not only determined by the basics of Orthodox theology but also by the language skills of and requirements for Orthodox pupils. The community of Orthodox pupils can be characterized as a European microcosm, as most Orthodox pupils have a migration background or experience from Eastern or South-Eastern Europe. The reference to the faith is more at home in the language and the tradition of the country of their background. However, the diverse shaping of the religious life at different places and the unity of faith worldwide belong together. Orthodox Religious Education aims to build bridges between the languages of local religious traditions and mentalities and the unity of faith worldwide, between the meaning of religious content for the personal life of young people in Germany and the ability to communicate this in the current diaspora context. The article provides an insight into the present situation, theological and didactic approaches to the development of religious language and communication skills, as well as impulses for dialog skills for religious literacy in denominational, religious, and ideological heterogenous learning contexts of a post-secular society.

Key words: *Orthodox Religious Education, religious literacy, language, dialog, denominational cooperation*

1. Introduction

The question of religious literacy arises in religious education, particularly in post-secular societies, and must be reassessed depending on local contexts and models of religious education. In the following, religious literacy is reflected on from an Orthodox perspective in the context of the diaspora situation of Orthodox pupils and Orthodox Religious Education in Germany. The situation of Orthodoxy in Germany and its dynamic development will first be presented. The focus here is on its migration-related

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character, which to a certain extent reflects a European microcosm. This is followed by an overview of Orthodox Religious Education in Germany, its specific situation, and its goals. A small proportion of Orthodox pupils take part in this, while the majority of them participate in an alternative subject or other denominational religious education. The third part focuses on the Orthodox pupils themselves, who have multilingual religious experience due to their background and socio-cultural environment, which is concretized in the fourth part with regard to Orthodox religious literacy from a theological perspective. Building on this, the fifth part presents principles and impulses for the development of a religious didactic perspective. In the subsequent sixth part, this complexity is taken up, and Orthodox religious literacy is reflected upon in the context of denominationally, religiously, and ideologically heterogeneous religious classes. Finally, results are recorded, and impulses for the further discussion of religious literacy are formulated with special consideration of the Orthodox perspective.

2. Orthodoxy in Germany as a European Microcosm

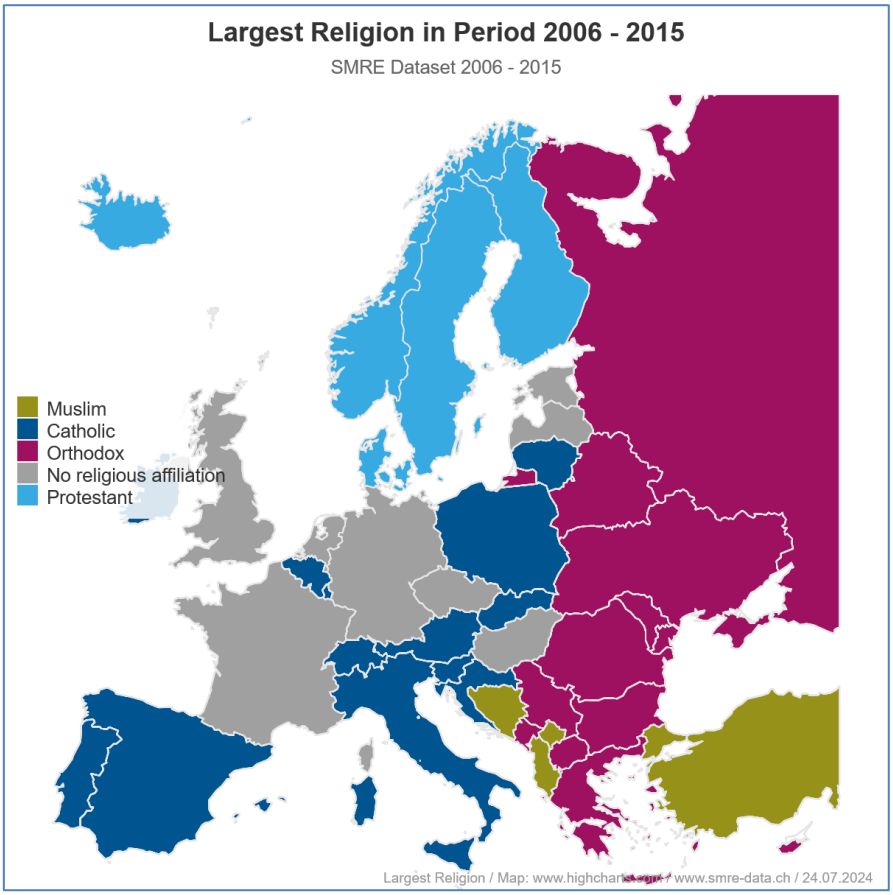
Germany is not only located in the heart of Europe, but can also be described as the heart of Orthodoxy in Central and Western Europe, as it is home to the largest number of Orthodox Christians in this region. Their presence in this country is largely due to a migration movement from South-Eastern and Eastern Europe and the Middle East, which is still developing dynamically today. In the last five years, the number of Orthodox communities in Germany has almost doubled.[1] Orthodox Christians living in Germany today encompass first, second, third, and distant generations, including those who no longer identify with a migration background.[2] Their life and family history are linked to at least one other country outside Germany with a predominantly Orthodox population, such as Greece, Serbia, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia. The same applies to countries and regions with a historically grown Orthodox tradition, such as Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey, where Christians today form a minority. Furthermore, Orthodox Christians today are part of the autochthonous population, even if their percentage share is relatively low at less than 0.1%.[3] The following graph illustrates how Germany can be seen as a European microcosm, but with the awareness that it is extended to the East.

[1] In 2017, there were around 1.5 million Orthodox Christians living in Germany (EKD, 2017, p. 4).

[2] A person is assigned a migration background "if they themselves or at least one of their parents do not have German citizenship by birth" (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018, p. 4).

[3] According to estimates as of 2015, their number is around 3,000 (Thon, 2015, p. 4).

Graph 1
Religious Affiliation in Europe (SMRE Dataset 2006-2015)[4]



The colors on the map do not refer to a homogeneous population but to the largest religious group in the country, which may vary in percentage terms. According to surveys by the Swiss Metadatabase of Religious Affiliation in Europe (SMRE) (2006-2015), the Orthodox share of the population in Greece is between 91.9% and 97%[5] and in Cyprus (southern part) 94.9%; this is more comparable to the Roman Catholic share of the population in Malta (94.4%), Poland (96.0%), and the Vatican (98.0%).[6] In the other mostly Orthodox countries, the proportion of the Orthodox population ranges from just under 60% to 88%. The figures may have shifted since the completion

[4] https://www.smre-data.ch/en/data_exploring/religious_affiliation#.

[5] The figures vary depending on the source. According to Thon (2023), 97% of the Greek population are Orthodox (p. II).

[6] https://www.smre-data.ch/en/data_exploring/religious_affiliation#/mode/majority_religion/period/2010/dataset/1562/presentation/table.

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of this study, but this is unlikely to have a significant impact on the majority constellation of mostly Orthodox countries.

The latest estimate of the number of Orthodox Christians in Germany is also based on such population statistics (Thon, 2022, p. IV). The following example is given to illustrate this: In Romania, 87% of the population is Orthodox, so it is estimated that about 87% of Romanian citizens in Germany are Orthodox Christians (Thon, 2022, p. II). The same principle is also applied to the calculation of Orthodox Christians with other citizenships of countries with a historically grown Orthodox tradition. According to estimates in May 2022, there were around 3 million Orthodox Christians living in Germany (Thon, 2022, p. IV), without considering the growing number of Orthodox Christians who have acquired German citizenship and no longer appear in the statistics, as well as the number of immigrants from Ukraine in the last two years. At the end of February 2024, there were 1,181,000 Ukrainian citizens living in Germany, over seven times more than at the end of February 2022 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024), whilst 62.7% of the Ukrainian population are orthodox (Razumkov Centre, 2022, p. 24). Overall, the number of Orthodox Christians in Germany is increasing.

In contrast to the majority situation in many so-called Orthodox countries, statistics of the 6th Church membership survey of 2022 show that in Germany the highest proportion of people (43%) have no religious affiliation (EKD, 2023, p. 8). It should be noted that Christians are recorded in their denominational diversity and not as one religious group. The members of the Roman Catholic (25%) and Protestant churches (23%) together make up less than 50% of the population, while together with the Orthodox Church (1,6%; SMRE) and other numerically smaller local churches, the 50% mark of Christians in Germany was reached (EKD, 2023, pp. 8-9). While the number of Orthodox Christians in Germany is increasing due to migration, a decline in the number of members of the largest churches is to be expected and thus also a decline in the number of Christians overall below the 50% mark (EKD, 2023, p. 9).

The constant presence and growing number of Orthodox Christians in Germany shows that this country will remain the center of life for many in the future. At the same time, Orthodox Christians are not only geographically, culturally, and linguistically diverse, i.e., with a wide range of geographical origins and associated linguistic and cultural references, but they or their parents or ancestors also arrived at different times in Germany and its current denominationally and religiously pluralistic and post-secular society. The Orthodox Church and its dioceses, which usually have ties to their countries or regions of origin, face the challenge of establishing and expanding structures to meet the religious needs of their faithful, foster inter-Orthodox communication and cooperation, and facilitate dialog with local society. Appropriate Orthodox Religious Education is of particular value for cultural and religious language skills within their own religious community and in society as a whole. Whilst the orthodox dioceses organize themselves independently from each other, at the same time, they act together within the Orthodox Bishops' Conference in Germany (OBKD) after the unity of Church, including the field of religious education (OBKD, 2010, Art. 2 & 5).

3. Orthodox Religious Education as a School Subject in Germany

In 12 of the 16 federal states in Germany, religious education is provided in accordance with the Basic Law (Art. 7 para. 3); in these 12 federal states the subject is regarded as denominational religious education at public schools and therefore, a joint matter for the state and the church. In case of opting out of religious education, an alternative subject like philosophy or ethics is usually offered (Meyer-Blanck, 2014, pp. 145-157). In principle, regular denominational religious education is open to all religious communities, which decide whether the content of religious education is in line with their religious principles. The OBKD is the cooperation partner for state authorities for Orthodox Religious Education. Orthodox Religious Education is a regular subject in five federal states, namely Baden-Wuerttemberg, Bavaria, Hesse, Lower Saxony, and North Rhine-Westphalia. Orthodox Religious Education is open to all Orthodox pupils and can be taught by teachers from all canonical Orthodox dioceses (Erklärung der kanonischen orthodoxen Bischöfe in Deutschland zum orthodoxen Religionsunterricht, 1996, as mentioned in Kiroudi, 2021, p. 66).

In the aforementioned federal states, there are curricula of Orthodox Religious Education for various school levels, both for elementary school and for lower and upper secondary schools. The curricula meet the educational and pedagogical requirements of the school and the church's educational mission and its religious content. However, with the exception of North Rhine-Westphalia, curricula are not available for all school levels in the various federal states. As a result, it is often not possible for students to participate in Orthodox Religious Education throughout their entire school career. Additionally, federal states require a minimum number of 5 to 12 Orthodox pupils to establish Orthodox Religious Education classes (sf. in detail Kiroudi, 2021, p. 32). This is not readily available in every single class or at every school (Kiroudi, 2021, p. 128), and lessons have to take place usually outside the regular school program. This leads to a very limited offer of Orthodox Religious Education in real school life (Kiroudi, 2021, p. 329), and less than 1% of Orthodox pupils take part in it. Most Orthodox pupils either attend an alternative subject, religious education of another denomination, or a so-called denominational-cooperative religious education; in the future, a Christian Religious Education is going to be offered in Lower Saxony[7], which is officially aimed at students of all Christian denominations. The Orthodox Church is not responsible for either of the latter, although it has already signaled its willingness for cooperation.

The fact that religious education is not regularly attended does not mean that it can be dispensed with; its contribution to religious education and education itself is too valuable. Orthodox Religious Education aims to meet the needs of Orthodox pupils and the Orthodox self-image, as well as the requirements of a school subject. The main aim of Orthodox Religious Education is to make its own contribution to the personal

[7] For further information on Christian Religious Education, see Heinig, Hinse, Lindner & Simojoki, 2024, and https://www.religionsunterricht-in-niedersachsen.de/christlicherRU.

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development of Orthodox pupils, in line with the school's educational mandate based on the Basic Law (Art. 2 para. 1; Kiroudi, 2021, pp. 36-45, 157-158). The free development of the personality of the individual requires a connection to the community, and a free community thrives on the free development of the personality of the individual (Langenfeld, 2001, p. 219).

Against the background of their diaspora situation, Orthodox pupils must be encouraged and empowered to develop their own religious identity in German society, which is also reflected in the curricula (as it is compiled in Kiroudi, 2021, p. 163). In addition, their language and dialog skills in their social environment are to be fostered, which also requires them to define their own position. The guiding principle of Orthodox Religious Education when it was implemented was the "formation of a Western Orthodoxy with an Eastern identity" (Papakonstantinou, 1998, pp. 209-212). This principle is based on the theological basis that the faith of the church can flourish under different conditions in different places (Kiroudi, 2021, pp. 327-328). Beyond integration into German society, I would add that Orthodox Religious Education can even build bridges across different cultures in Eastern and Western Europe. However, the ability to build bridges through engaging in dialog in Germany and worldwide requires language skills.

4. Cultural Background and Linguistic Situation of Orthodox Students

The biography of Orthodox students in Germany corresponds to the European microcosm and the Orthodox Church described above. The Orthodox Church is worldwide one church in which its believers are united in the same faith, liturgy, and canon law (Labardakis, 2000, p. 299), while the language used in the church, customs, and mentality may differ. Thus, Orthodox students are united by the same belief, which for them is rooted in the culture and language of their respective backgrounds with different intensity. In the family, among friends, in the church, and sometimes also at school, at least one other language is generally used in addition to German. For children from mixed marriages where the parents have different cultural backgrounds, two languages in addition to German are common.

Parents quite often prioritize their children learning their language of origin, leading them to attend mother tongue lessons or bilingual schools, where available. This does not mean that all languages are mastered at a native speaker level -some may barely speak these languages. However, they often remain significant for one's identity. Different languages can convey different content, cultures, and thinking structures. For Orthodox pupils, religious contents are usually also part of their language of origin, which is often used in the parishes, at least for the sermon but also for communication within the parishioners. The liturgical language can either be identical to the language of origin or based on it. In the Russian and Serbian Orthodox churches, for example,

Church Slavonic is used, which differs from the languages spoken in the countries of origin. Thus, there is one more language in addition to the two or three everyday languages. Even if knowledge of these languages is very limited, it is possible to be familiar with religious terminology exclusively in these languages.

There is also a non-verbal level of religious language that can be perceived with the senses and is particularly pronounced in church life. Icons, for instance, are omnipresent in the church and in worship as well as in forms of religiousness. Icons can be found at home, in the children's room, and in the icon corner; small icons can be carried in the wallet; magnetic icons are attached to the driver's or passenger's seat in the car; sometimes postcard-sized icons are placed in a book. What lies behind them is most likely to be seen in church: When Orthodox Christians enter the church, they first cross themselves in front of the icon, bow before it, and kiss it. In this way, they greet the icon and thus the people depicted on it: Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints. This non-verbal form of prayer can, but does not have to, be accompanied verbally. It remains an encounter with the sacred, a communication between living persons. It is a symbolic language including, a sense of sacredness. Orthodox children are actually initiated into this language through participation. In a way, they are born into this language, like in their mother tongue. However, as with the mother tongue, the corresponding language skills can also vary at different levels.

Religious language skills and abilities of religious communication are related to religious socialization. Not only can the environment of the post-secular society in Germany have an impact on the Orthodox pupils' own approach to religion, but also the religious references in the society of their country of origin, through their family, parish, and social environment, as well as through their own experiences in the country. They can be influenced by certain religious mentalities of a country of origin, i.e., an attitude of mind and ideas with which people approach questions of all kinds and situations in life (Values Academy, 2020; Rexroth, 2022), or a zeitgeist that does not necessarily correspond to the current times. Sometimes specific occurrences or simply the natural approach to religious customs or religion itself in different contexts can have an influential effect in dealing with religion and on religious identity formation. Religious mentalities vary in different countries; this fact poses both a challenge and an opportunity for dialogue in religious education.

It would be too shortsighted to reduce the religious language skills of Orthodox pupils to the influence of their cultural background, even if it plays an important role. The question is where they see themselves in the various cultures, which passive and active religious language skills they have, and to what extent this is sufficient to find answers to their questions, their age-specific as well as their personal needs and interests. Religious linguistic competences obviously do not only include philological language skills. Moreover, it is about being understood in one's own needs and being able to understand religious references for one's own life. Therefore, language skills go hand in hand with literacy, with the actual content that languages convey.

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5. Language and Religious Literacy from an Orthodox Theological Perspective

From a theological perspective, the language in the church is strongly connected to the Word per se. The communion with the Word of Life and its testimony establish and sustain the life of the Church. For "that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you" (1 John 1:1-3). The proclamation of the message took place after the Word had been perceived with all the senses, since the Word itself was revealed in all human senses. For "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14).

Five aspects come together in this momentum of Word. Firstly, the "inexpressible condescension of the Word of God" takes place; God condescends to himself; he "did not count equality with God," but he becomes accessible to people by becoming equal to humanity, remaining God at the same time (Matins of Great and Holy Monday, Canon, Ode 1). No words can fully express this "inexpressible" mystery of the incarnation of the Logos. Secondly, the condescension (κατάβασις) of the Logos corresponds to the condescension (συγκατάβασις) of his words in the Holy Scripture. According to St. John Chrysostom, due to the love of the Lord, the language of the Scripture condescends to human weakness and limitations in order to make the Word accessible (sf. in detail Rylaarsdam, 2014, pp. 9, 17, 57 note 38; Despotis, 2024, pp. 70-73). Its language is compatible with the comprehension of the human being without claiming to be able to fully fathom the Word of God. Thirdly, this enables people to hear and experience it, and fourthly, to talk about and communicate it. The process between listening, understanding, and communicating comprehensibly is the fifth and indispensable point for religious literacy.

This process manifests itself in the life of the church as a Pentecost event. Those who had heard and seen (1 John 1:1) were "filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:3). A reciprocal process takes place between speaking and hearing; thus, each of the addressees "was hearing them speak in his own language" (Acts 2:5). What is even more astonishing is that the addressees, "dwelling in Jerusalem… from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5), at the same time "multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language" (Acts 2:6). Scripture does not go into detail about how people hear the same word in their own language at the same time. However, it is certain that the word is comprehensible for everyone through the Holy Spirit.

"The 'Logos', the Word of God, was not written down or verbalized, but embodied," which is why from the beginning there was no privileged language for the proclamation of the divine Word; moreover, the Holy Scripture and other texts of tradition and liturgical life were translated into the languages of the peoples of the known world

(Sonntag, 2016, pp. 87-88). Hearing the good news in one's own language is fundamental for its growth. The work of the Holy Spirit and the instrument of human language go hand in hand to reach the souls of people. It is not only a sign of sincere respect to include the linguistic and geographical-cultural characteristics of people and peoples in the life of faith; it is also an act of sanctification of these characteristics and a contribution to human self-discovery (Yannoulatos, 2020, p. 33). On the basis of its tradition, the Church seeks to "unite the diversity of voices that has grown over time into a harmonious praise of God" (Yannoulatos, 2020, p. 35).

The languages of the respective peoples are fundamental to the mission of the Church.[8] The verbal level concerns both the liturgical language as well as pastoral and social communication. The challenges differ between the traditionally more Orthodox countries, the "classic" missionary areas without a Christian background, and the so-called Orthodox diaspora. The latter has the greatest heterogeneity of its believers in terms of language and culture. This heterogeneity does not refer to the entirety of Orthodox believers but also heterogeneous the parishes in terms of origin, cultural background, and citizenship (Miron, 2016, p. 205).[9] As described above, the faithful are multilingual without speaking the languages at the same level or even at native speaker level. There are only a few German-speaking parishes, while in the other parishes, German as a liturgical language is used only depending on needs, to a limited extent or not at all. The translation of liturgical texts into German also proves to be a challenge, as it moves between the poles of meticulous textual accuracy, user-friendly comprehensibility, and formulations of a historically grown Christian tradition in a now plural and post-secular society. Furthermore, liturgical language has always been a poetic language; the entirety of liturgical language is also a question of aesthetics and beauty.

However, as Schmemann (1964) very aptly points out, "the language of the Church [is] deeply all-embracing, and not only linguistic meaning of the word that man and society do not hear or understand, the language which includes the texts and the rites, the whole rhythm and whole structure of worship" (p. 176). The challenge of learning this language lies above all in the fact that the church and the world no longer speak the same language with regard to the "ultimate meaning of things" (Schmemann, 1964, p. 176). In the liturgy there is an existential reference to life; even the symbolic language is not only symbolic but real (Schmemann, 1964, pp. 176-177). Be it that one kisses the icons, making the sign of the cross or receiving a blessing, the sanctification of the gifts and receiving the gifts means receiving Christ himself and his grace. Furthermore, human stands before the face of God (Hebrews 6,4), being revealed "to me

[8] The work of the Slavic apostles Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century (Gopenko, 2012, pp. 47-59) and reconstruction, or rather resurrection, of the Orthodox Church in Albania after the political transition in the late 20th century by today, as well as mission in Africa, can be cited as examples of the missionary history of the Orthodox tradition.

[9] In the Greek Orthodox parish of St. John in Brühl, 67 different countries of origin or nationalities of bridal couples, godparents, and baptized people have been counted in 33 years.

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who I am, what I am given, it puts me face to face to the Kingdom, and, therefore, reveals the exile and alienation from God of my whole life" (Schmemann, 1964, pp. 176-177).

In summary, from an Orthodox perspective, religious literacy is about opening up the essential content that is expressed in the forms of language as a whole and goes beyond them, as well as having an existential significance for the life of a human being. It is about recognizing the condescension (συγκατάβασις/κατάβασις) of the Logos to human for the ascent (ἀνάβασις) of human to God (St. John Chrysostom, as mentioned in Rylaarsdam, 2014, p. 8). Human beings themselves are actively involved in this process of cognition, as a collaborators of the Logos, as seeker and questioner as well as listener and speaker.

6. Language and Religious Literacy in Orthodox Religious Education

The described theological basis of church unity and geographical-cultural diversity of voices, the understanding of language in a holistic sense, both on a linguistic level and with regard to the content associated with it, as well as the needs of Orthodox pupils, are significant dimensions for the purposes of religious education. Above all, there is a need for developing language skills for a profound understanding of religious content and for literacy. There is a chance to perceive the potential of the diversity of voices as a religious approach in awareness of its limits; at the same time, religious education faces the challenge of using a common language. Finally, developing the language skills and literacy of Orthodox children and young people fosters their ability to deal personally with religious issues as well as to communicate them within the multilingual Orthodox community and the local society.

Schmemann (1964) formulates from the perspective of the diaspora experience and liturgical life a kind of elementarization process -without labeling it as such- and translation that can provide orientation for the development of language competences and literacy. It must first be clear which specific message is the focus. Therefore, one must "go beyond the literal meaning and understand the place and the function of a given text or series of text within the whole" (Schmeemann, 1964, p. 181). It is about a deeper understanding of the message, namely "the same and eternal message," which can effectively be re-created (Schmeemann, 1964, p. 181). The creative use of language is a means "in order to convey the meaning and the power of the original"; depending on the needs, "one has to paraphrase it and shorten it" (Schmeemann, 1964, p. 182). Schmemann (1964) does not, however, speak here of a completely free creative act, but of a profoundly careful process of the "rediscovery of the meaning first, then its 'reincarnation' in adequate words and categories" (p. 183).

This impulse is to be made fruitful for religious education, implemented didactically, and combined with other didactic approaches. Three further didactic dimensions

should be emphasized, which were selectively chosen from Danilovich's (2021) concept of language-sensitive learning due to their theological-religious pedagogical connection (p. 17-19): Firstly, language as an independent topic must be examined in terms of its significance for faith and religion. Secondly, the language skills of the pupils must be recognized and strengthened; (theological) content and topics must be expanded against the background of the pupils' linguistic resources. Thirdly, the language of faith should not only be considered from a linguistic point of view, but its content should be reflected upon in the context of the pupils' world of life and experience.

The approaches described for developing religious language competences and literacy are not exclusively theoretical in nature, which are then put into practice. The foundations of Orthodox theology and the real situation of Orthodox pupils in the diaspora offer impulses for theory and practice of religious didactics. Already in the curricula, "the language of religion should be regarded as an independent phenomenon," whereby, in addition to linguistic elements and metaphorical dimension of the language, the hermeneutical foundations also contribute to "being able to deal appropriately with statements of faith and, potentially, to identify with them in a well-founded manner" (Kultusministerium NRW, 2017, p. 18). Of course, there are age-specific differences in this respect. The Orthodox textbook for primary school, "Mit Christus unterwegs" ("On the Road with Christ"), considers the background of Orthodox pupils through identification figures (Keller, 2017, pp. 2-7).[10] Theological content and examples of lived faith are included in geographical and cultural diversity as well as with regard to language skills in the German context and further reflection on the content.

An example of this didactic approach in the primary textbook can be found in the unit about resurrection. The Easter greeting "Christ is risen" is used in the various liturgical languages of origin of the identification figures as well as in German (Keller, 2016, pp. 94-95). This greeting and the Easter hymn bear witness to the main message of faith (1 Corinthians 15:15), and even less religiously socialized Orthodox Christians are familiar with it in their geographical and cultural environment. A German version of the Easter hymn, for which there is no standardized translation available, is hardly known to Orthodox Christians. The textbook takes up the Easter hymn in German and uses a Byzantine melody (Keller, 2016, p. 92) that is very familiar to a large proportion of Orthodox believers; text and music are coordinated. In this creative act and partly constructivist process, a bridge is built between the world of religious experience and religious linguistic competence.

On a so-called silent page, an icon and a prayer are usually depicted without commentary; it is not the viewer who speaks, but the image and the prayer. Icons and symbols have their own language and expressive power, which can be interpreted but not fully fathomed. In the unit on the resurrection, a picture of the Easter light and the Easter hymn are shown on a silent page. Only at the end of the unit are tasks offered for further reflection, such as "Describe a situation in which it would be good

[10] For the didactic concept of the textbook, see Kiroudi, 2022, pp. 179-182.

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to have light" or "What does it mean to be a light for other people? Share examples" and "Talk about: How is the light of candles connected to the resurrection?" as well as "Decorate candles that you can take to church for the Easter service." Incidentally, the so-called reflection page with the tasks is entitled "Christ, the light of the world." Through the perceptible light, the light of the world, people can also discover the light for their own lives that makes it worth living.

7. Religious Literacy and Demands for an Interdenominational Dialogue

In Orthodox Religious Education, religious literacy means not only opening up in the language forms of Orthodoxy described above but also considering the diversity of Christian denominations, religions, and worldviews (Kultusministerium NRW, 2011, pp. 11, 13-15) and understanding the "meaning of religious ideas and religious testimonies in their various forms, also in comparison to non-religious ones" as well (Kultusministerium NRW, 2017, p. 18). This competence requirement is initially formulated for the denominational Orthodox Religious Education, which points to the development of Orthodox pupils' religious literacy and dialogue competences within a pluralistic and post-secular society. The ability to understand also "the special claim to truth and validity of religious forms of language" is regarded as essential to get in dialogue (Kultusministerium NRW, 2017, p. 18), which requires competences of knowledge as well as of judgment.

As most Orthodox pupils take part in religious education of other denominations with religiously, denominationally, and ideologically heterogeneous classes, the complexity of religious literacy and dialog competences as well as the related demands are increased. They bring with them their own religious mother tongue, both verbally and in terms of content, and a religious mentality that may differ from that of German post-secular society. Their own religious literacy can also diverge, i.e., on the one hand they come from a denominationally and linguistically-culturally divergent background, and on the other hand they cannot and must not be seen as experts in Orthodox theology. Against this background, they are faced with the challenge of entering into a dialog with other religious mentalities and experiences as well as non-religiosity. The question here is how communication on religious issues can be successfully arranged and which language skills can be used and must be developed.

In denominational-cooperative religious education, i.e., in the joint responsibility of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, the principle of "strengthening commonalities - doing justice to differences" (Schweitzer & Biesinger, 2002) has become established as a guiding orientation. However, it can be asked which differences are actually significant in the German Protestant-Catholic context and whether a common culture of Western Christianity and post-secular experience of German society are rather setting the tone. This makes it all the more important to expand this orientation

"to save what is special" (Simojoki, 2015, p. 74) with regard to Orthodox participation, which is actually given through the participation of Orthodox children in these classes, so far, without cooperation with the Orthodox Church and Orthodox religious teachers. Religious literacy for sensitivity to differences and denominations is required (Kiroudi, 2019, p. 66).

Such sensitivity for denominational particularities places high demands on the - up to now only- non-Orthodox teachers: "They must pay attention to the experiences of strangeness and difference of Orthodox children and young people without reproducing these experiences in the form of othering by using Orthodox pupils in classes as representatives or experts of their faith" (OBKD & EKD, 2024, p. 29). At the same time, Orthodox pupils should "feel represented in religious education in terms of content, belonging and atmosphere" (OBKD, 2023). Sensitivity is required to overcome the tension between taking young people seriously on the one hand and preventing them from being exposed on the other. In addition, students must be encouraged to express themselves freely in the classroom, knowing that they are a vibrant part of this learning community. This requires an atmosphere in which differences are not simply permitted or tolerated but are seen as an enrichment for religious learning processes. In order to moderate these learning processes, dialog skills must be introduced and practiced that can convey religious content.

This complex learning setting requires religious education teachers to have not only didactic abilities but also appropriate knowledge of Orthodoxy, which is not yet sufficiently anchored in the training of Catholic and Protestant teachers (OBKD & EKD, 2024, p. 29). Religious literacy is an issue for both pupils and teachers. In addition, the question arises as to how they relate to the religious content of other denominations that are not part of the Western tradition and the current zeitgeist. What convictions and values, as well as individual "prejudgments," do they have towards other denominations (Simojoki & Lindner, 2020, p. 127)? Just one example might be the Easter greeting "Christ is risen," which is so natural and self-evident for Orthodox Christians, even if they are hardly religiously socialized. Do Catholic and Protestant teachers know this Easter greeting? What is their personal connection or even belief to it? How far does their religious literacy for this Easter greeting reach, and how far can they cultivate religious literacy for this greeting in a heterogeneous class with Orthodox pupils?

Heterogeneous religious classes with pupils of different religious mentalities and languages increasingly reflect the transformation and globalization of society as a whole. It is not just a question of whether a common religious language can be developed for religious phenomena but to "make sense of religion" (Jahnke, 2023, p. 125-126). It is about how one's own religious mother tongue reaches a level that enables them to communicate with others and bringing the "special" orthodox narratives into a constructive dialog, expanding the horizons of religious education and worldview in a nearly global classroom. This expansion requires the openness of all interlocutors to listen to each other, to communicate, and to learn from each other. Finally, the holistic perspective of orthodox religious literacy has the potential to benefit and shape this

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dynamic process of understanding, in which the human being unfolds the "Logos" from condescension to ascent anew.

8. Results and Discussion

The development of religious literacy in Orthodox Religious Education in Germany is a dynamic process. Various dimensions of religious mother tongues come together in this process, namely linguistic, sociocultural and denominational dimensions. All dimensions are multilingual: on the one hand, they bring several verbal and socio-cultural languages with them due to their origins and their life in the diaspora. On the other hand, their living environment presents them with the challenge of being able to communicate both within their own linguistically and culturally diverse Orthodox community and with other confessional, religious, and non-religious ideological backgrounds. The question is how they can present themselves and the particular content of their faith and shape this dialog productively. However, this presupposes that the orthodox students can find themselves and enter into a dialog in a safe and open-minded space. This first requires perceiving and strengthening the religious language skills of the students, then a careful and creative use of language in order to be comprehensible and expand the skills; and last but not least, improving language skills and comprehensibility is a prerequisite for a successful dialog.

The didactic of religious learning processes and the development of religious literacy not only in Orthodox Religious Education but, above all, in denominational-cooperative religious education or in a future Christian Religious Education are still to be discussed. How can a common language be found without leveling out the peculiarities of religious literacy from an Orthodox perspective? Which common language skills are already available, and which religious foreign language skills still need to be developed? What knowledge and what religious (foreign) language level are required for religious education teachers? A sound basis of religious language and foreign religious language skills in teacher training is just as essential as in religious education classes themselves, so that religious literacy can be successfully developed. Such religious language processes require the participation of religious native speakers, who by their own experience can contribute not only to condescension in religious literacy but also to common experiences and the ascent in life.

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