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Version 1.1, 14 December 2018



The Therwil Affair: Handshakes in Swiss Schools

Podcast with **Philipp Hetmancyzk** and **Martin Bürgin** (17 December 2018).

Interviewed by **Thomas White**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/the-therwil-affair-handshakes-in-swiss-schools/>

Thomas White (TW): *Hello there! I'm here in Bern, Switzerland, at the [EASR](#). We're on the final day. And I'm joined here by two Swiss early-career researchers, [Dr Philipp Hetmancyzk](#) and [Martin Bürgin](#), both from the University of Zurich. And because it's based in Switzerland, this conference, and we need to really get to grips with issues that are affecting Swiss understandings of religion – and politics and religion – in the public space, we are going to be talking about the Therwil Affair. This, as far as I remember from reading in the international press a couple of years ago, was a big issue, carried on the winds of international press as often sensational religious controversies do. But I suspect I'm not the best person to introduce this to our Listeners. So, Philipp and Martin, what was the Therwil Affair? Can you please explain this for us?*

Philipp Hetmancyzk (PH): So, what we now call the Therwil Affair is named, first of all, after the place, [Therwil](#). Therwil is a little town close to the city of [Basel](#), which probably might be better known. In Therwil there was a secondary school. And two Muslim students of that school decided not to shake hands due to religious reasons, as they claim, with the female teacher. And this very local incident kind of became a nationwide affair, a case where the media was involved and reported extensively. Politicians debated about the case, brought it up to the cantonal parliament. And even [international media](#) reported about that. So, in the end, it became just a huge thing.

TW: *Wow. Well this is unusual and perhaps even rather hard to understand – the importance of handshakes. Are handshakes that important in Switzerland?*

PH: And just to correct your introduction – Martin is the Swiss guy here. I came to Switzerland for

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TW: *Oh, I beg your pardon!*

PH: Just to put that straight. No problem at all. But I think that question Martin definitely has to answer – because I never experienced schooling in Switzerland.

Martin Bürgin (MB): Well, of course. I can answer the question from a very personal level. I mean, I grew up in Switzerland and went to school in Switzerland. And I have to say, I don't remember that shaking hands was a ritual, a common ritual, at school. Maybe at kindergarten, but definitely not at high school. And if we look to that from a historical perspective and we can go one generation back, it was very common that students were sitting behind their desks when teachers came in. And they had to stand up and say, "Hello" and that was it. So there was for sure, no handshake at all. Whether it is, maybe, on the very personal level . . . ? As a scholar in the study of religions – maybe we can discuss this afterwards – but I would say it's very interesting to see the handshake as a symbol within a cultural symbol system. If we remember [Stuart Hall](#) it is the participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects and practices. And we can interpret this handshake, or the denial of a handshake as a cultural practice.

TW: *Right. So the handshake is symbolic of a far bigger conversation and far bigger issues than just simply, you know, classroom management. But let's try and get to grips with the actual case study before we try and explore the really big conceptual issues, which will be a fascinating aspect to this topic. Now as I understand it, the school did try to reconcile this issue on its own terms quite early. Is that correct?*

MB: Before the refused handshake was discussed on the national and international level, the local school management had already reached a compromise with the students and parents. And, basically, it was agreed that the students should be allowed to acknowledge their teacher with another appropriate, respectful form of greeting rather than being obliged to shake hands with them. So this compromise temporarily exempted the two students from their obligation to shake hands with their female teachers, but at the same time it also forbade them to shake hands with their male teachers.

TW: *Right. So . . .*

PH: Can I add to that?

TW: *Yes, of course. Please do. (5:00)*

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PH: I think what was at stake here – and it’s kind of the important point also of the whole affair – the whole stressing of the gender dimension of this thing. Since they refused to shake hands with the female teacher, teachers in the school feared that now they will go against the principle of gender equality if they would allow for that, just like that. So they forced the pupils, or convinced them also, “If you don't want to shake hands with the female teachers, you don't shake hands with your male teachers either.” Just to stick to the principle of gender equality. It was made a big issue, in this case.

TW: *Excellent. So there was an effort to both respect the religious freedom of the Muslim students whilst not transgressing on strong principals of gender neutrality.*

PH: Exactly.

TW: *But then the issue got a lot larger, didn't it? The media got hold of it. It ballooned into this national conversation. How was it framed in the media, and how did it kind-of create such a controversy?*

MB: It exploded when the [Arena](#), I would say the most influential political TV programme in Switzerland, addressed the subject in two specials, under the lurid titles “Fear of Islam” and “Switzerland without God”. Then a barrage of reports and comments in the media as well. As the demand of concrete political measures, postulated by the politicians of influence on the national level, put pressure on the cantonal authorities and politicians in Basel-Country.

PH: I think we have to add to that, also, that the solution found by the school was just meant as a short time-span compromise. The school wanted to have it fixed on legal terms, so they asked for legal expertise to check into the case. Because the school wanted sort-of defined standards to which they could refer in case something like that would happen again. And so they drew it to a legal level, and this made the whole thing public and raised the media attention. So we have, then, two systems kicking in, both with their own interests: the lawyers, the lawmakers, checking on this issue of gender equality, freedom of religion, educational law; and parallel to that the media echo, of course, trying to make the thing a hot topic.

TW: *Were the media discussing it within a legal frame? Were they using legal terminology? Or were they using more populist ways of engaging with the issue?*

MB: Yes, definitely. It was about, as we said, the equality of women and men; it was about Islam, and Islam as a thing which has to be feared; it was about Christian culture; it was about liberal culture.

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And so the whole discussion was not really about the . . . it exploded away from this very local issue.

PH: But that was also possible because the media could connect to other hot topics and hot debates, like building mosques in the public sphere, wearing the burqa and other debates which are currently . . . which already existed before. And the Therwil case was just another piece in that sort-of chain of discussions. But again, this then put it in line with “Swiss Culture versus Muslim immigrant culture”.

TW: *Right, so we've got this discussion of a kind of culture war taking place – or certainly that framing of the issue. For our listeners who might not perhaps be experts in Swiss culture, or the history of Swiss national identity, what are the key tropes or key narratives that can help us understand the forces behind this conversation, this national debate?*

MB: Different narratives here, but I would say one of the most important topics is that of the equality of women and men. For that one has to know that in Switzerland women claimed their right to vote not until 1971, on a national level. And in one specific canton, called [Appenzell Innerrhoden](#), as recently as 1991. (10:00)

TW: *Wow!*

MB: Following a decision by the Federal Supreme Court – so, not on the basis of the democratic level. But now it's very interesting to see how the same conservative parties and sometimes also the very same politicians – now a little bit older – which opposed the right to vote for women a few decades ago, act now as the spokesmen for an equality of women and men against – from their point of view – archaic forces which menace Swiss women.

TW: *So, those who were strongly opposed to . . . or were at least quite sceptical of women's rights are now using it as a rhetorical means with which to push against Muslims within Switzerland.*

PH: It was sort of instrumentalised, I think. I mean, maybe adding to that from a sort-of outsider perspective on Swiss cultural narratives – which are kind of complex, I would also say, which is fascinating Because you have this narrative of Swiss history and culture as being very liberal, with kind-of a lot of referendums, having a very strong sense for democratic procedures. But on the other hand you have still strong institutions like the army, with sort-of an idolised “male warrior culture”. And also, the national hero figure as the guy with the strong bow, shooting the apple, right? [Wilhelm Tell](#).

TW: *We know the [music](#), yes.*

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PH: And there's also a strong sense that it is not . . . The army is part of the wider population. [Every male guy](#) has to go to the army, takes the weapon home. So whenever there is need to defend the country, they are ready. And this thing is still kind-of going strong, I have the impression. Maybe not as much, of course, as 30-40 years ago. But if I compare it to Britain and Germany, for example, I think it makes a difference here, where you still have that argument as . . .

TW: *So are we perhaps looking at a machismo which is defending women from insults, as opposed to really seeking to enforce gender equality.*

PH: I would not go that far.

TW: *That's too far.*

PH: But the Therwil case definitely kind of was instrumentalised to push the argument forward, “Look at the Muslim minorities. They have an issue with women's rights.” But we don't look at our own shortcomings. Because we are very liberal – although you can put many question marks behind that.

MB: The narrative I described before, that was more like the conservative narrative. And of course you have another narrative which I would describe as a liberal narrative. So the liberals in their motion, when the whole this was discussed in the local cantonal parliament, they described a refused handshake as a symbol – I could cite that I guess – for a fundamentalist and militant ideology – so you hear that in their own words – which contradicts our state and social order which is built on personal freedom, legal equality and the equality of men and women. And that's a different thing. As the conservatives would propose. So for the liberals these are the three pillars of society. And now from the perspective of a history of concepts, maybe it's interesting to see that if we replace the equality of women and men with the rather old-fashioned term of brotherhood – of course, produced in times of pure male hegemony – we get the very familiar trio of *liberté, égalité et fraternité*. And that's the slogan of the French Revolution which is essential for the self-conception of the Swiss Liberals, that they wanted to defend.

TW: *So on the one hand, we've got the liberal narrative of equality and Enlightenment values, (15:00) and then on the other hand we got the conservative . . .*

MB: defending of Swiss women.

TW: *And so we've kind-of got this strange confluence of cultural narratives being allied to push against migrant and specifically Muslim identities and interests. It's fascinating. Moving away from*

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perhaps the cultural discussion to more the legal issue – because it did become a legal discussion as well – how was that framed, and what were the arguments on either side?

PH: I think at least one power play that played an important role here was “civic duties versus religious freedoms”. And some politicians brought it forward that civic duties should be given primacy over religious freedoms. And this whole trope, or this logic, has a history in itself. And probably Martin can say a little bit more about that, because it goes also back to this culture war.

MB: Yes that's true. The concept of primacy of civic duty is also connected with a narrative, with a political narrative. It comes from the [Federal Constitution](#) of 1874. It was the first revision of the first constitution of the modern Swiss State, which came from 1848. And both constitutions were products of conflict situations between the Catholic conservative camp and the liberal camp. The constitution of 1874 and the so-called primacy of civic duty – that is a product of pure culture-war politics. This constitution, as well as the first constitution, served as a warrantor of the – at the time – liberal radical majority and was directed against the Catholic conservative minority. So they served as a dispositive of power.

TW: *So how does this fit? Is this more kind-of ensuring the loyalty of the Catholic community to the Swiss State, as opposed to Rome? Or the civic duty – it has some very strong policy implications even today, doesn't it? But . . .*

MB: Yes, that was expelled from the Constitution. So it's not any more in the Constitution, at the national level. So they want to reintroduce that, or wanted to introduce that on a cantonal level, after the so-called Therwil incident. Yes the constitution – as you said – of 1874: that was a political instrument to weaken the Catholic conservative camp. I mean, it included things like the suppression and ban of the [Society of Jesus](#), and the prohibition of the establishment and re-establishment of monasteries in Switzerland, the removal of the right to be elected as members of the National Council for Roman Catholic priests – so not very democratic for Roman Catholic priests – and restrictions against the formation of new Roman Catholic Dioceses in Switzerland. That was a pure culture war product.

TW: *And this narrative of civic duties was being mobilised to push against the religious freedom arguments.*

PH: It was brought up again, yes, interestingly. Although it has this kind of history package. But in the end they had to drop it again. They did not . . . Although it was brought up in the discussion, if it

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should be included in the constitution again – in the cantonal constitution – you have to say. But it was dropped, because of course it was a lot of legal question marks behind if that was still possible.

Anyway, to your question about the legal framing – because that's not it – what they still introduced is that cases like Therwil have now to be reported to the bureau of immigration affairs by the teachers.

This is now part of educational law. And since you asked how this changed the perspective since the Therwil case Because it is clear, now, that you can now bring it up to the Bureau of Immigration Affairs, then the whole issue of religious diversity in the classroom is now being reduced to an issue of immigration questions.

TW: *So we've got an incident that takes place in the classroom now being an issue of immigration. Is there more to the story, there? (20:00) I mean, were the two Muslim school children, were they recent immigrants, or were they citizens, or . . .? It seems strange to have . . .*

PH: I think it was second generation kids. But probably not citizens, yet.

MB: I think from Syria, yes.

TW: *Oh, wow. Ok. So we're starting to almost get integration issues starting to be . . . integration at the national policy level being focused on what's taking place in the classroom.*

MB: I think that was why politicians took the whole issue on the national level: to speak about questions of migration and immigration – and maybe not that much about handshakes.

TW: *Yes. So carrying over into broader anxieties and concerns about immigration to Switzerland. Is that how it relates to other controversies? We were suggesting, earlier, that there are other points of conflict, perhaps, between the national narrative of culture and immigrant communities.*

PH: Yes. And actually, talking about immigration, I think there's . . . we already mentioned like the burqa, the mosques, the minarets. But I think what we forgot so far is also the debate about immigration as such – because that's big topic, too. This is about the integration of Switzerland in wider Europe. Because Switzerland kind-of experienced a huge influx of foreign workers from all around Europe. And this led also to an intensive debate about immigration, local culture, fears of local customs and Swiss culture sort of dying out. And I think this was just another issue to which the Therwil thing could be associated.

TW: *Yes, so the site of the school being very much a focus of identity politics. And through the conference we've been hearing kind-of papers that have explored the idea that schools are not simply*

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places where people learn, but almost centres of ideological production; where children are inculcated with certain values and certain behaviours and certain perspectives. What do you think are the implications for education, as such, when it gets drawn into these kind of national controversies of culture, citizenship, and diversity?

PH: To answer the first part of your question, I think it's still the case and schools, of course, are places where you learn about mathematics, where you learn about literature, but also from a Religious Studies perspective, school is definitely still a place which is imagined by wider society as a place where its norms and values are being taught and reproduced. So I think this has not gone. But the question is definitely: what norms and values do you want to teach in school? And I mean, this was also debated in the Therwil case. Because it was said, "Yes – all schools should be a place where they learn to cope with difference; where they should learn about diversity; individual peculiarities; tolerance; respect and so on. But then, what actually happened was that they used this argument to basically out-rule religious diversity in the form of two Muslim guys rejecting the handshake. So there was then, rather: "OK, the school should be a place where norms and values are practised, but these norms and values are not in accord with what these two guys, what the two boys did." So that put a very strong vision of what schools should be and what norms and values should be practised in school, and what does not fit in to the school.

MB: But of course we don't have any definition of what these values and customs should be. I mean the cantonal government spoke of, "considering the increasing migration of people with various ethnic and religious backgrounds, it is essential that those people respect our laws our values and our customs." The cantonal government, you can hear it, doesn't give us a definition of what these values and customs should be. But clearly we can see a constructed dichotomy of a "we" and "the others"; a construction of identity through alterity. **(25:00)**

TW: *Fascinating.*

PH: There was a second part of your question which has stayed unanswered so far. And that was how this kind of national debate about school . . . and what would be the impact on school being connected to citizenship, and what would be an alternative way to deal with such national issues in terms of education? And I think what would definitely help, in such cases like we have in Therwil, is that students and pupils are kind-of equipped with the competence for religious questions. That means also not from a religiously normative perspective, but just having knowledge and competence about religion. So they can basically critically evaluate such debates by themselves, and also kind-of learn to

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understand what is at stake here. And that then brings me again back to the study of religion as a discipline. Because I think implementing contents from the study of religion in school curriculum would help a lot. For example, to equip students to kind-of get an opinion on such things, by themselves.

TW: *Yes. So the handshake isn't so much a moment for discipline or enforcing national homogeneity or cultural integration but a pedagogic opportunity, perhaps: where the kids in the classroom can actually think about where people come from in different perspectives, regarding the religious values that cause them to physically interact with people in different ways. I suppose the question I want to conclude with is, what is the policy position now? Where are we regarding handshakes in Swiss schools?*

PH: That's a very good question actually. The media attention has gone by now, because the debates are all through. The media is now already onto the next event. And to the next stuff. So what kept almost unnoticed is that the debates in the parliament went through, with the respective change of law as we described earlier. So the civic duties over religious freedoms has not become part of the Constitution, but teachers have to report to the immigration office such incidents. What is done now is kind-of out of the media attention. And the case now, with this, is more or less settled. But with the respective political outcomes which you can see as Yes, it will have an influence on further cases. Because there's now a kind of pre-structure for the way of how to handle such cases. This is what the politicians wanted, but which is also kind-of giving away the chance to probably have a more thorough debate on religious diversity in school. This chance is now, somehow, out.

TW: *Yes. Well thank you very much Martin and Philipp. This was an extremely stimulating conversation. Any final comments before we sign off and say farewell to our Listeners?*

MB: (Laughs).

TW: *I think we're all keen to enjoy a beer, now, at the end of the conference!*

MB: And the next media scandalisation in Switzerland will come, for sure! (Laughs).

PH: Definitely! (Laughs).

TW: *Wonderful! Thank you very much for that.*

PH and MB: Thank you.

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