

MANY RELIGIONS, DIFFERENT CULTURES - ONE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

Young People's Perceptions of Religion and Religious Education: A Challenge for new Conceptions

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I. Introduction

In Hamburg you will not find a class whose pupils are homogeneously German and certainly not with a uniform Christian, in particular Protestant-Lutheran background. Two processes have had their influence on school: The drastic decrease in church membership in the last 20 years and the emergence of a plurality of religions which is mainly the result of immigration. Due to this, there are many children in the schools of our city who have only a weak tie to the traditional forms of Christianity or no tie at all. There is also a significant number of children who belong to other religions, primarily - but not exclusively - to Islam. Furthermore, those who consider themselves as religiously committed cannot be looked upon as a homogenous group with regard to their adherence to one of the major religions.

In the Christian spectrum, for instance, are significant differences: Only to a lesser degree they are marked by the traditional dividing line between Catholicism and Protestantism; primarily they have their roots in the combination of confessional and cultural factors. Take for example the differences between Polish and South-American Catholicism and that which is practised in Hamburg; between the Pentecostal churches of African and European background or between the Protestantism of the Free churches and of the established churches in Germany. Note also the variety within Islam: Sunnites and Alevites from Turkey, Muslims from the Middle East and from Tunisia and Morocco.

With the pupils of Hamburg you will find all of these different religions and world views and the diverse forms of their expressions which cannot be classified in the light of the organised religions nor of explicit atheism. All of them sit together in school, including religious education classes. Conscious of this fact, the teachers in Hamburg have gained a lot of experience in instructing 'religious education for all pupils', disregarding their religion and world views.

We are sometimes no longer aware of the exciting importance of this fact since in the last 20 years the heterogeneous character of the pupils in Hamburg has become normal. However, from the perspective of most of the other German *länder* this 'religious education for all' is still extreme. And in the pedagogic of religion, we only started some years ago to deal systematically with this challenge. In Hamburg we contribute to this task our small interdisciplinary research-project 'Youth - Religion - Education' in a multicultural society marked by social and economic disparities.

Briefly speaking, we work on two levels. On the one hand, we try to analyse the factual conditions for religious education in Hamburg with empirical methods of the social sciences. On the other hand, we relate these analyses with the findings of the pedagogic and sociology of religion. This way we want to attain a pedagogy of religion in the context of multireligious and multicultural pupils which is theologically and educationally responsible.

As part of our larger research project titled *Youth - Religion - Education in a multicultural society* we are investigating the religiosity of 14 to 16 year olds. In what follows we will concentrate on this investigation in the body of this paper.

In particular, our object is to research on the - if not all but at least the most important - structures of meaning of 'religion' by means of an qualitative empirical analysis. Under investigation are Christian, Muslim, spiritualistic (New Age and occultism) and - as far as our questioning concerning the interpretation of religion - atheistic orientations.

Presently we are questioning pupils on the topic of 'notions of belief'. Although first conclusions about the religiosity of young people can only be drawn after the completion of this examination, I would like to point out some striking aspects which we encountered in our work.

First of all, we faced an immediate difficulty in our empirical inquiry: We could find easily groups of committed Muslim pupils, whereas we had to contact local Christian parishes in order to find explicit Christian pupils because in only a few schools we were able to locate a group of 4 to 6 committed Christian pupils. But even the parishes are facing similar problems: In areas with great social problems only a few parishes still have youth groups. Only in middle class/upper class suburbs we could find suitable interview partners.

Therefore, at least in the cities of the Federal Republic of Germany - which considers itself a Christian country - it proves to be the greatest difficulty within the empirical phase to find Christian pupils.

It is furthermore interesting how heterogenously the Muslim pupils portrayed themselves in the interviews. Apart from individual differences they reflected the different Islamic traditions and currents. We had almost to break off an interview because the Muslim girls were accusing each other of deviating from proper belief.

Finally I want to point out that explicit atheistic pupils can profess their faith in a spiritualistic religiosity. In our interviews we encountered pupils who gave express disapproval of Christianity or any kind of belief in God. At the same time they confess with straightforward determination their belief in life after death in the sense of rebirth. It is this group which gave the most vivid reports of visions and encounters with spirits (e.g. of the deceased).

There isn't yet enough focus on this form of religiosity. Many pupils acknowledged in the interviews that they have never or only rarely spoken about their experiences.

Of course, these first impressions are only preliminary; analytical results can be attained only after the completion of the present field work. Religious Education (RE) in school is a specific aspect of our research because here pupils of different religious convictions meet and relate to each other. In the following I am referring to our empirical inquiry within the school context.

2. Results of Our Interviews

In 1993 we conducted a survey on attitudes of teachers in Hamburg. They showed great openness about the inclusion of non-Christian religion into their RE. Only very few teachers advocated an explicit confessional religious instruction. On the contrary, such a confessional religious instruction serves often as a negative counterexample for their RE concept. Therefore, intercultural RE is not an alternative pedagogical concept for a possible future but it is part of the everyday life in many schools in Hamburg.

In the following I want to focus on the interests and wishes of pupils in multicultural and multireligious school settings with regard to their RE. I am basing my reflections on 28 interviews with experts, two written surveys with 120 pupils and 13 group interviews with pupils with altogether 63 participants. 7 of these group interviews were conducted in schools with a high percentage of young immigrants. With this we hope to contribute - from the perspective of pupils - to the question of the opportunities (and possibilities) of an intercultural RE.

I will proceed in two phases. *Firstly*, I want to portray the general interests of pupils, independently of any possible multireligious and multicultural make-up of their classes. *Secondly*, I want to deal with the experiences of pupils of classes with a very heterogeneous composition.

a) General Attitudes of Pupils towards RE

In order to portray the general attitudes of pupils towards RE I want to start with five sample statements which depict the structure of the interest of pupils.

Girls of grade nine (age 14/15), *Hauptschule*, with regard to the difference between RE and other subjects:

Arzu (Turkish girl): "This is something very different. There, you learn something about yourself, there you are really deep into it and you can talk about it, talk about it more openly, you get to know more, there. And in maths you just calculate, calculate, calculate."

Miyase (Turkish girl): "Religion is something for you(rself)."

Ölzem (Turkish girl): "In biology, or so, the rules are fixed, there you can't change them. But in RE, you can talk about what's on your mind. There you say how it is for you."

Arzu: "In maths you can't say: 'No, I want it to be completely different. This shouldn't be plus, it should be minus.' But in religion, you can say: 'No, this is different.'"

Girl of grade nine (age 14/15): "It is interesting, to talk, to discuss things you usually don't talk about in everyday life. There, we took specifically *Death* as our main topic. And we talked much about death, what we feel, and this was very interesting."

A Turkish boy, grade 10 (age 15/16), Gesamtschule: "It is interesting, well, with the meaning of life, ... I even didn't know what Islam understands by that, and I really appreciated it, that we dealt with that. Well, the meaning of life is a quite important question for myself, but also a very difficult one."

Boys from former Yugoslavia, grade 10 (age 15/16), Gesamtschule: "...We've read texts which deal with God and science and all possible things with God. Well,

on the one hand that was quite interesting, but on the other hand you don't understand what you should do with this, because now you know certain things which you don't consider to be true."

Boys, grade 9 (age 14/15), Gesamtschule: "This RE is somehow like politics you talk about old times and then, scarcely anybody is interested in it, what happened three hundred years ago or so. Nobody wants to know that. If you want to know that, you can read the Bible."

The common ground which appears in these remarks by pupils can be summarised in four categories:

First: RE is interesting for pupils if they have the opportunity to relate the subjects of RE to the questions of their own interpretation of life. RE is interesting if the pupils can put their subjectivity and their problems into the class; they expect to be in the centre of the class. This correlates with the demand for communicative and co-operative forms of learning. Free discussions, exchange of pupils' attitudes and the mutual acquaintance becomes of paramount importance.

Second: In the view of the pupils this kind of RE differs from other subjects in not reproducing determined 'objective' content. The clarification of one's own questions is considered to be beyond any objective judgement.

Third: Topics of pupils' interest are on the one hand elements of the current debate, 'abortion' or 'anti-foreigner hostilities,' which touch concrete problems of this age in its social and personal dimension. On the other hand, pupils are interested in topics which deal with the uncertainty and contingency of life, e.g. 'Death' or 'Meaning of Life.' Here, RE gives room for the pupils to talk about topics which are usually passed over in everyday life.

Fourth: Pupils show no interest in RE if they cannot relate its topics to their own problems. Lack of interest emerges if the relevance of religious answers to their own life is put into question. The distance to religious answers which the boy in our forth citation above is expressing can also lead to a lack of interest in religion in general. Such pupils usually gave a shrug if asked what they found interesting in RE.

Many of the German pupils attribute the irrelevance of religious answers explicitly to Christianity, in particular the Bible. Two main reasons can be mentioned: On the one hand some pupils - as of grade nine (age 14/15) - consider Christianity as sufficiently known. On the other hand they refute in particular the Bible as having any relevance: Most times they understood the Bible literally and consider it as utopian or just as unbelievable.

b) Experiences of Pupils of RE in Multicultural Classes

These four common interests are shared by the pupils of all kind of schools, independently of their multicultural settings. What are the special experiences of pupils of RE in multicultural classes, which are composed very heterogeneously with regard to religion and world views?

I'm going to answer this question by, *firstly*, showing the opportunities and the positive evaluations of RE, and, *secondly*, in portraying specific problems which accompany this RE.

• *Opportunities and Positive Evaluations*

In particular Muslim pupils experience a living religiosity in their life-world and have great interest to put this experience into class. Partly they participate in class with explicit religious interpretations to certain questions. This life-world religiosity penetrates the interest of pupils to communicative and co-operative forms of class work. When pupils discuss the interpretation of their lives, they always deal with the religiosity based in their life-worlds. Pupils want to become acquainted with the religion of their class-mates and to exchange their views. This way religion is brought from the dimension of the life-world into class and discussed on this background.

• *Three short statements from our interviews may demonstrate this:*

A boy, grade 9 (age 14/15): "It is interesting just to become acquainted to the beliefs of others. The first has no belief at all, the second has a belief and we also have a Turkish girl with us, she's Muslim and there you learn something from her."

A Turkish Muslim girl, grade 9, Realschule: "We have a boy in our class, he's an atheist, he doesn't believe in anything... I found this really interesting, I wanted to listen to him when he was saying this and then I wanted to talk to him *this cannot be this way*. This is ...interesting, if you get acquainted with the religions of somebody else."

Another Turkish Muslim girl, grade 9, Gesamtschule: "This is very interesting, for example, there are very different religions, and I have chosen that in order to know what the German religion is."

Within multireligious classes the cognitive content of RE is connected with the personal interest of the pupils because of the conditions of their life-world. RE becomes in an extraordinary way a matter of the pupils themselves (compare the first citation above).

• *Specific Problems*

This kind of RE gives pupils an opportunity to talk about their varying personal attitudes and opinions. Therefore, specific problems arise which differ fundamentally from those of classes which are orientated towards the instruction of pre-fixed content. The decisive precondition for dialogue between pupils of different religious backgrounds, however, is tolerance and an open atmosphere.

A girl, grade 9 (age 14/15), Hauptschule: "It is good that you speak about your opinion and what you think and nobody says laughingly *ho, ho - do you really believe things like this?* If you say it like this and another has a different opinion you talk about it seriously. That's why I like my teacher - she gives us opportunity to talk about it."

Many pupils - Christian, Muslim and Atheist - reported negative experiences.

A girl, grade 9, Gesamtschule: "I also disliked, for example, when we came together for the first, our teacher asked us whether we believe in God or not. And some answered *Yes*, and some *No*. And then, those who had said *No* said about those who had said *Yes*: *This girl is weird, and so on.*"

A boy, grade 9, Gesamtschule: "...because I deny the presence of God, there are some people who tell me: *Man, you are stupid, there exists something like this.*"

Muslim pupils have some specific problems. Firstly, there is the fundamental difficulty that parts of the Muslim pupils like to talk about their religion. On the same time they want to learn about Christianity. However, they rarely meet German classmates who are outspoken Christian. In this situation dialogue can become one-sided.

A Muslim girl, grade 9, Realschule: "What really annoys me is that if I ask a German to tell me something, they cannot answer anything. They don't know anything about Christianity. They want to know more about Islam than about their own religion."

When Muslim pupils report about their religion, the scope of their reports should correspond to their interests. They dissociate themselves from a mere superficial treatment of certain religious practices.

A Turkish girl, grade 9, Realschule, on a RE-class which treated specific Islamic behaviour as e.g. the prohibition of pork: "In RE we don't talk much about why we believe in God, why we believe in Mohammed and why we don't believe in Jesus. We treat the topics only half, we don't bring them to an end, that's not very interesting for such kind of RE."

Furthermore - and most important - they dissociate themselves from attributes and connotations which resulted from prejudices, as for example the identification of Islam with Turkish culture.

A Turkish girl, grade 9, Realschule: "I think, when you say *Muslim* you think of Turkish culture: to have trouble, to stay at home, not to go out, to do kitchen work. That's the Turkish tradition, but this isn't right for Muslims."

Of course, these pupils should challenge any attribution of a specific religion to somebody because of his/her nationality.

Despite the problems and reservations which the pupils mentioned they dissociate themselves unambiguously from any RE which is orientated exclusively towards Christian content.

A boy at grade 9, Gesamtschule: "If one religion is pre-eminent, if only one is really emphasised - I dislike this. There are also questions about Christianity which you can settle even as an atheist, on which you can talk about, as for example *Love your neighbour* or so. You can talk about this even if you're not a Christian. But one should not give one religion pre-eminence; you should talk about all religions equally objective."

To sum up: in schools with a high multicultural and multireligious make-up the interest of the pupils emerging from their life-world corresponds with their interest in the religion of their classmates. Intercultural RE lives on the existing religious and cultural experiences of the pupils. It does not live on the religiosity which is merely ascribed to them.

Only under these circumstances pupils are motivated to build up a personal relation to the intercultural topics which are presented in class. This way they can relate their own religious and cultural experiences to those of the others and settle them in dialogue.

3. Final part: Reflections and Conclusions

The point of view which is presented personally seems to be more interesting than written text. The plurality of positions within a class appears to increase the interest compared to a homogenous class. Pupils want to get known to the respective other position: Turkish pupils want to become acquainted with the 'German religion', German pupils want to know about Islam. However, this wish constitutes at the same moment the difficulties: Many German pupils cannot sufficiently outline their religion - a fact which is already criticised by the Turkish pupils.

They encounter thus a problem which is connected with profound questions of religious socialisation and basic questions about the character of living Christianity in our country. Pupils remind themselves of the fact that the Turkish tradition is not identical with 'the Islam', that the discussion in religious education is not unproblematic as far as they cast light on the different certainties of faith. Nevertheless I want to stress that the pupils as well as the teachers of Hamburg unanimously support a religious education in which all pupils participate, thus including different religions and world views. No religion should *a priori* be privileged.

These remarks of pupils show the interest for a religious education in light of the experience within multicultural and multireligious groups. These tendencies have to be acknowledged, deepened and broadened.

However, the empirical findings do not directly provide the conceptual foundation or the (political) constellation for an intercultural, interreligious religious education which is open for dialogue. Rather, in the light of these empirical findings we have to reflect on basic questions - some of them I want to mention now:

Firstly, it refers to the fundamental debate whether religious education should be given in religiously homogenous groups - perhaps only for specific age groups or certain educational phases - in order to provide the child with a secure environment and to allow her or him to grow into her or his own tradition. Or whether it is the religiously heterogeneous class which can bring the - today so often forgotten - religious questions to bear again, and allow or even support the formation of a religious identity. You have to bear in mind the concern of the first position, even if you hold - as we do - the second view. Maybe there is even a construction of religious education which allows to combine the advantages of homogeneous and heterogeneous classes. We should talk more about this topic after we have seen the video.

Secondly, it touches the question whether the Judaeo-Christian tradition gives a particular openness towards other religions and a readiness for dialogue which is not necessarily welcomed from the point of view of other religions.

Lastly, it deals with the basic questions of dialogue and its possibilities in the framework of schools. I want to make only some brief remarks. You have to ask,

for instance, whether dialogue is just a luxurious addition to theology and educational science or constitutive for the understanding of these sciences. Theologically you have to come back to basic reflections which HJ Margull, professor of Ecumenics and mission in Hamburg, has formulated in the 1960s and 1970s. For him dialogue constitutes the core of theology: In light of the historical particularity of Christianity he considered an introspective theology as obsolete - a theology which relates only to its own tradition and understands itself as absolute. For Margull's mission-theological perspective, the formation of a Christian identity was only possible in face of the encounter with other religions and *weltanschauungen*. Taking up E Levinas, my colleague Helmut Peukert, professor of Education in Hamburg, concludes as well that the awareness of the other is constitutive for the formation of a person. These references may give those second thoughts which consider dialogue a nice but dispensable luxury

What does this imply for the understanding, the possibilities and the limits of a dialogical orientation in religious education? We are working on this subject. Many basic and concrete problems and opportunities for religious education are linked with these questions. Some of them I have already mentioned. There are others which I cannot discuss now. They search, for example, for the features of a didactics of religious education which, on one hand, takes up the productive exchange of different positions, linked with their respective life experiences, and which, on the other hand, takes into consideration the fact that great parts of our youth are not bound to any religion or world view; that many pupils are religiously inexperienced and lack knowledge. Thus, they have to be sensitised for the relevance of such questions and we have to give them information.

There are also very concrete questions linked with an interculturally open religious education, for instance, the forms of an adequate teacher training, the possibilities of co-operation with other subjects, or the concept of learning fields (*Lernbereiche*).

In Hamburg we deal with these questions. Our research is embedded in the greater context of efforts by the teachers, by the Pedagogical Theological Institute and the Institute for Training and even by the school administration of the city of Hamburg.

However, I do not want to paint a rosy picture. Our empirical and conceptual research shows us the great difficulties which are linked with the intention for an interreligiously and interculturally open religious education. Here we need fertile exchange with other research projects. Furthermore we know - as I already mentioned in the beginning - that the situation in Hamburg is not representative of the Federal Republic. At the moment it is not clear whether we have an avantgardistic function or whether we - as 'northern lights' - go an isolated way. However, we also feel that things have changed politically. In times of a new manifest racism and a growing political right in our country we want and must use the time in the still existing liberal climate in Hamburg to establish on all levels the opening towards an interreligious and intercultural religious education which strives for dialogue.