

How can Religious Education deal with the Tension between Normativity and Moralization in Times of the Environmental Crisis? A Proposal

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Abstract

Ethical learning is always a challenge in Religious Education, especially in the field of sustainability and eco-justice. Here, the tension between the normativ orientation towards autonomy and freedom in the tradition of the enlightenment, on the one hand, and the danger of Moralisation as a way of overpowering the students in a destructive way is very demanding. Methodologically referring on theoretical concepts and situated in the German context where Religious education is an ordinary subject in school, this paper elaborates on this tension and develops a category which allows us to deal with it in a critical and productive way.

Keywords: Education; Religion; Ethical learning; Sustainability

The other day, a colleague said she met an acquaintance at the supermarket who told her about an upcoming vacation in New York City. She's already looking forward to her time there. My colleague, who is involved in the debate on sustainability and eco-justice, a debate which deals with the contribution of theology and religious education to the protection of environment in times of climate change, and justice for all creatures, be it animals, humans etc., then asked, "Don't you think of your children when you travel the long way from Germany across the Atlantic by plane?" "Yes," the acquaintance would have said, "of course, the children are allowed to come along" (Bederna 2021:77).

It's not a joke. It's a serious matter. It has gained emblematic significance for the debates currently taking place in the field of religious education in Germany. Religious education has to do with how people come to a responsible autonomous judgment about religion and belief. It is primarily about how adolescents learn religious language, how to understand religious semantics, how to read the Bible, how they can understand religious traditions (out of different religious backgrounds and denominations) and how they can enrich themselves from them in their lives and for society, but also how they can set themselves apart. Religious education aims at religious autonomy. That means students should learn the competences and the abilities to position themselves in a reflective way towards religion, faith and belief. That is the goal of religious education in schools. This is its contribution to the common good, even in an increasingly secular society. Here, impulses for the construction of one's own identity, of raising big questions concerning sense and hope, but also for social changes, criticism and irritations can be set in motion, which problematise unreflected agreements and trigger processes of consciousness (Kropac 2021:17–28). In Germany, there is a separate school subject, religious formation (Religionsunterricht) as an ordinary subject (Stögbauer-Elsner, Linder, Porzelt 2021:93–124). Whereas Catechetics belong to the parishes to introduce adolescents into the faith,

religious education in school aims at critical thinking out of personal experience in the field of religion. In this context, religious education from the heritage of the biblical tradition of creation, as well as a Christian environmental ethic, is currently involved in the debates about sustainability and ecojustice. Their specific contribution lies above all in how to learn attitudes of sustainability and ecojustice (Bederna 2019; Gärtner 2020:47–64; Spahn-Skotzski 2022; Bederna, Gärtner 2020:27–29) in school out of the perspective of religion and what its contribution to the fight against climate change and injustice could be. In this process of learning, form and content are interrelated: on the one hand, one learns what ecojustice can actually be, what it means, what consequences and implications it has (content); and on the other hand, religious education always aims at learning, practising and performing this attitude and practice of justice itself – within the given narrow limits of the school (form). It is obvious that this can only happen under conditions of freedom. Otherwise, it would betray the aims of religious education, which is precisely oriented towards autonomy, which even goes so far as to enable these pupils to decide against religion on a justified basis. Therefore religious education is a school for freedom (Lange, Ernst 1980).

Religious education for sustainable development follows precisely this line. That's means it understand itself as a contribution for implementing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals from the United Nations (Bederna 2019:12). But taking a closer look already shows a problem, a tension, perhaps even a dialectic, as my introductory example has already shown: it is about the relationship between normativity and freedom, into which the danger of moralisation plays. My example already points to such moralisations. As we will see later on, the problem with them in the context of religious education is that only emotions are mobilised in an unreflective way. The border line to suggestion, to patronage or even to hegemonic overpower seems to have been reached, perhaps even crossed. Moralisation would therefore have a counterproductive, even paradoxical effect; it would performatively undermine the normative orientation of religious education towards the autonomy and freedom of the students. It contradicts what religious education normatively aims at: judgement-making, autonomy, and reflected positionality out of freedom in the tradition of enlightenment (Grümme 2019:126–166).

My thesis is that religious education can deal critically and constructively with this tension between the normative orientation of religious education and moralisation with a hermeneutic of critical-self reflexivity. Methodologically, this involves referring not to empirical studies but to theoretical research and theoretical concepts. I will try to show this in three steps: 1. I wish to better understand moralisation as a religious pedagogical problem, 2. I take a look in the discourse about moralisation and at the religious pedagogical toolbox in order to examine which instruments are available in religious pedagogy for learning about ecojustice, and finally I wish to 3. sketch a constructive-critical idea, which leads into 4. further perspective, at least in short strokes.

Moralization as a Religious Pedagogical Problem

For a religious education oriented towards ecojustice, ecological learning is “religious learning” (Altmeyer, Stockinger 2019:165–167). This is the beginning of a learning process that addresses the “questions of human survival” in light of the biblical vision of all-encompassing justice (Blasberg-Kuhnke 2007:245–253), which means for eco-justice in a universal sense. This combines cognitive insight into the economic and political

contexts of justice and injustice on a global scale with practical forms of learning. It tries to address ecojustice in the classroom, in extracurricular contexts and outside of school, and to perform a practice of climate justice. Practical, performative and cognitive learning processes play an important role here, for example methodologies such as dilemma learning or just community learning by Lawrence Kohlberg as critical elements in the field of his famous theory of the development of moral judgement from a pre-conventional to an autonomous post-conventional level.

Especially in the context of the ethics of creation and the environment, however, an affective pedagogy of religion is also relevant. It makes the impulses of the ethics of compassion practical in a subject-oriented way, in particular to pave the way for perception, sustainability-oriented motivation and the ability to act (Naurath 2019:192–195). The constructivist theory of learning especially teaches us that one cannot learn without affective bonds. This is where motivations, contexts of experience and practices are initiated that turn education into an act of freedom. This means that an ethics of good living constructed through resonance experiences can substantiate the ethical relevance of practical, emotionally meaningful experiences (Rosa, Hartmut 2016:461). When educational projects about clothing companies, which attract children and young people in particular through cheap products and clever marketing, problematise the negative ecological footprint associated with them and the violation of human rights at the same time (Adam 2006:58–64), the political dimension of this sustainability education becomes visible.

For religious education, it is specific to incorporate into this form of sustainability learning the perspective of a gifted, gratuitous justice with a normatively charged option for the poor, the excluded, the unseen (Grümme 2014:88–95). This normativity characterises the teaching. But there the tension of normativity and moralisation can be seen – on different levels of intensity. Let me give you three examples:

1. For Katrin Bederna, a protagonist of religious sustainability education, religious education for sustainable development aims “to put people on a standpoint of sustainability. If this does not happen, it has not achieved its goal – but it has not failed, because it can only open up such a possibility. Intent is not indoctrinating” (Bederna 2019:233–234). This approach is impressive in its sharpness, but it leaves open questions. In my view, an ambivalence is not to be overlooked. This is ultimately due to the strong reception of virtuous ethical impulses, which in a central way configure sustainability as the material content of ethical education. Is the point of view of morality really, as claimed, directly the point of view of sustainability?
2. It becomes even more problematic when one analyses didactic concretisations: In a draft text, Markus Bürger and Sebastian Jendt represent a decidedly partisan religious education in the sense of emancipation and sustainability. Consequently, religious instruction should “practice listening to the voices of the poor, the suffering, the excluded, the forgotten, the lost” (Bürger, Jendt 2020:452). According to Bürger and Jendt (2020:452), students should learn that “through our daily lives, our consumption and especially our meat consumption we are intertwined with the global destruction of the environment and

the emergence of poverty”.¹ For Bürger and Jendt (2020:452), the aim of religious education is: “To see what the causal ‘structural sins’ are for species extinction, mass animal husbandry and environmental destruction; to judge what an ideal state should look like in the light of the Gospel; to act in the sense of reflections on Christian-motivated animal welfare practices”.

This strong partiality is realised in other religious didactic designs by a certain methodical arrangement of experiential learning, which leads to a sharpening of exposure didactics. In her critical examination of anthropocentric theology and ethics, Simone Horstmann sees herself prompted to enable an animal-ethical learning of sustainability in religious education through experiential, confrontational learning in non-curricular places of learning. “There can therefore be no innocent vision that does not at the same time bear the reflex of a – reproducing or changing – action. In this respect, those exotic places that are usually avoided in everyday life are worth a trip. Abattoirs, animal transports, experimental laboratories, animal factories, zoos etc. show an unadorned view of the life and death of all beings who have been denied the luxury of an ascribed capacity for emancipation or need for emancipation has so far been denied, and this (almost) always also in the name of theology” (Horstmann 2020:193).

These examples are characterised by a strong optionality and partiality of religious sustainability learning. But what is missing here is the possibility of reflexive distance and multiperspectivity. The possibility for learners to decide against the orientation of religious instruction given by the teacher remains weak. But not only that: here the boundary to the overpowering of the learners is already porous, where the exposure experiences are undialectically accompanied by emotional-affective arousal that no longer allows for critical reflection, which is the normative goal of religious education in school as mentioned above. But can ethical and sustainability-oriented learning in religious education take the position and transfer the values and basic ethical beliefs of the teacher to his or her students?

In short, what is highly problematic here is a form of hypermoralism, a moralisation that becomes practical as the overpowering of others. In order to better understand this, it seems useful to delineate the concept of moralisation more precisely and at the same time to look for examples of how to constructively deal with this tension between normativity and moralisation.

The problem of Moralization and how to deal with it in political didactic

Currently, there is a discourse of moralisation happening in various areas of theology, inspired by the social sciences and philosophy. In social ethics as well as in environmental ethics, the “dead-ends” of moralisation are analysed (Vogt 2021:65). Whether Niklas Luhmann’s system theory, with its constitutive moral abstinence, is the appropriate star witness to warn against morality and instead to demand a “moralization asceticism” has to be discussed (Vogt 2017:38–39), yet new forms and structures of sensitisation to the aporias of moralisation are developing. Without going into more detail here on formal and above all content-specific differentiations of moralisation practices, moralisation can

¹ A.a.O., 457-458.

be qualified in the following way after the ethicists Corinna Mieth and Jacob Rosenthal: Moralisation is an excess of morality, an exaggeration. “Exaggerated may be (either) the content of a moral judgment or system of judgments, in the sense that too much is demanded or made the subject of morality, or the form: moral demands that are legitimate in themselves are exaggeratedly expressed or emphasized” (Mieth and Rosenthal 2020:35). Moralisation exists, according to Catholic ethicist Stephan Ernst (2022:171) in the field of animal ethics, when it “absolutes its own moral view and no longer permits another, but sanctions it”. The moraliser claims to know the truth and evaluates, sometimes also in highly suggestive language, a different position. Moralisation thus contradicts an attitude of ambiguity tolerance and multiperspectivity. Here the gesture of principled clarity and the principle of public scandalisation, which becomes practical as devaluation, delegitimation and heteronomy, dominates (Hilbert 2022:9–33).

Measured against the normative postulates of religious education, it is now clear what is problematic about the above-mentioned teaching examples: they prescribe evaluations, suggest unambiguity, undermine multiperspectivity, and sanction those who do not adopt these strong evaluations. In short: these examples are heteronomous as well as tending to authoritarian and thus contradictory to the normative postulate of religious education, namely autonomy and freedom of the adolescents of positing themselves.

To address this tension between normativity and moralisation, however, a religious education for ecojustice and sustainability could learn from political didactics how to deal with conflicting truth claims and normativity in the classroom. A milestone in the development of political education is the Beutelsbacher Consensus, an agreement by researchers in political didactic of axiomatic importance from 1975, which lays down three maxims of forward-looking political education: (Sander 2005:20–30)

1. The prohibition of overpowering (Überwältigungsverbot). According to this, the boundary between indoctrination and political education is where learners are prevented from making an independent judgement by political learning in the sense of a desired, pre-determined opinion.
2. The controversy of teaching (Kontroversitätsgebot), which reflects the controversy and pluralism of the political in science and politics. What is controversial in society must also be controversial in the classroom.
3. The ability of students to analyse a political situation and their own interests and to look for ways and means to influence the situation in the sense of their own interests. Thus, in an emphatic sense, we presuppose an understanding of education “in the tradition of the Enlightenment as a confrontation with politics shaped by the guiding mode of rationality”, which seeks to promote human autonomy “in the sense of independent judgment and action” and refers “to democracy as a desirable political order” (Sander 2005:28; Herbst 2019:147–162).

Even if it were a verdict affirming the basic democratic order, that verdict must not be enforced. The form and content must be recognisably consistent and must be oriented to the postulate of autonomy. Teaching methods must not be designed in such a way as to

contradict the aim of political education. Teaching oriented to maturity and freedom is counteracted by a non-participatory authoritarian style of teaching. Conversely, participatory, pupil-oriented teaching practises what such a pattern of political education is all about.

Even if this Beutelsbacher consensus is now much more contextualised and furthered in the Frankfurt Declaration 2015 in a self-reflective and emancipatory manner (Lösch 2020:394–398), there are important lessons to be learned for religious education:

Such a multiperspectivity of religious instruction and the prohibition of overpowering respect the freedom of the learners fundamentally. The judgements and beliefs of learners cannot be determined as predetermined outcomes of ethical learning. Religious education, on the contrary, expects learners to reach different positions from teachers. In contrast to a form understood as socialization or even as the legitimation of domination, religious education aimed at maturity therefore relates critically and transformatively to its socio-political as well as ecclesiastical context (Grümme 2016:316–359).

Self-reflexivity of ethical learning

But within religious education, there is an already established set of instruments for dealing with the tension between normativity and freedom in the field of ethical education, which is an important part of religious education. The sustainability-discourse and ecojustice-discourse belong to this field. Ethical education, in the context of the biblical-Christian tradition, aims at the ability to “lead practical discourses of value and to develop a capacity of judgment that enables responsible decisions regarding the questions: What must I do? What should we do? What should be valid? What is desirable and sustainable – for me and for others?” Ethical learning thus aims at ethical perception, language and action, and – especially in the school context – ethical judgment (Ziebertz 2010:434; Linder 2017:250–260; Grümme 2015:24–28). The focus is on four different approaches in the present and the history of religious education. In addition to the process of value elucidation, which empirically investigates how young people think ethically, in addition to value development, where ethical learning is put in a developmental psychological perspective, as elaborated by Piaget, Kohlberg, Fowler and Oser, our question focuses on value transfer and value communication (Ziebertz 2010:434–440). The value transfer (1) wants to convey predetermined values as an orientation. Be it in patristic pedagogy, be it in Augustine's or in medieval monastic and civic schools, or even in the modern schools of the Reformation, this form of moral learning is focused on transmitting the Church's moral teaching to the younger generation. The focus is not on the subjects, but on the message (Ziebertz, Roebben 2010:456). It is a material ethic in the context of a largely closed particular universe of values, into which children and adolescents are introduced by moral pedagogical impulses, primarily of instruction. Their result lies in the worldly roots of this morality, which is strengthened and motivated from there. Their limit lies in the inability to adequately manage the pluralism of values. It remains heteronomous (Meyer-Ahlen 2010:25–29). We have unmistakably seen this pattern in my examples. But who protects religious instruction in the case of value transfer from its ideologisation and moralisation? It is therefore not surprising that this is accompanied by a more interactive discursive model: the model of value communication (4). Based

on the concept of communicative reason by Jürgen Habermas and Helmut Peukert (Peukert 1987: 69–88), the focus here is on participation in argumentative discussion processes. This concept wants to make communication and argumentation skills possible through a change of perspective from the situation of everyone else. In accordance with the Pedagogical Paradox, autonomy is increasingly assumed in the proceedings. It is about the argumentative examination of validity claims and the clarification of which values and value orientations can claim validity (Ziebertz 2010:442–444). If there are no more values, norms and virtues that can be regarded as material or formal grounding and goal horizons, then the development of ethical value orientations and their critical reflection in the foreground must be given priority. Critical judgement with regard to contextually pressing moral problems is at the centre. Helmut Peukert exemplifies how this approach is rooted in communication-theoretical concepts on the one hand and in a correlatively related anthropologically turned theology in the tradition of Karl Rahner and the Vatican II-Counsel on the other hand. According to this theology anthropology is open to theology and theology is based correlatively on anthropology.

An “ethics of inter-subjective creativity” is to make use of the well-established impulses of the Judeo-Christian tradition to enable subjects to cope with the challenges of the present in the service of their autonomy and to be able to take a critical and transformative look at the educational and social contexts in the light of the message of God and its changing and liberating power (Peukert 1987:82). In this way, ethical education in religious education is a critical, transformative and – because it is not limited to itself – a public education (Peukert 2015; Grümme 2015). This form of value communication is the prerequisite for dealing with the aforementioned tension between normativity and moralisation. Instead of starting from substantial values that are conveyed, these are generated in the experiential process and reflected interactively and discursively. This pedagogy trusts the adolescents that they can form a well-founded judgement for themselves, which in turn critically examines the judgements of others. However, Hans Joas (1999:274–291) draws attention to the fact that even a purely formal reason in the paths of communicative rationality reaches its limits here, because the specific motivations, contexts and experiences can only be taken into account in this way.

Only through such a form of value communication can the tendency towards heteronomy and overpowering inherent in moralisation be interrupted and at the same time normativity secured. Multiperspectivity and controversy can be taken into account.

However, this form of value communication remains problematic as long as it does not critically reflect on its own practices. In the moral discourse of moral theology, a “heuristic of sensibility” is demanded for this (Hilbert 2022:25). A culture of self-examination, of sensitivity to others is admonished to avoid moralisation. But this does not go far enough. From poststructuralism and postcolonial studies, we can learn that the practices of reason themselves are fed into hegemonic, violent mechanisms that have counter-intentional, even paradoxical effects. Even in a reason that normatively aims at emancipation, autonomy and freedom, differences are carried out in the execution, compulsions of subjectivation, and essentialisations, and thus tendencies towards othering, devaluing others, are performed performatively. It therefore needs, in my opinion, a reason grounded in the theory of alterity, which critically enlightens itself with a praxeological orientation. What is needed is a form of education that critically correlates normativity, alterity, self-reflexivity and freedom (Grümme 2019:126–167). Of course, I can no

longer show in detail how empirical-analytical, systemic, and hermeneutical elements correlatively merge with self-reflexive-critical elements in such a form of thought out of the spirit of a Critical Theory transformed in the theory of alterity. I can no longer show in detail how such an action-theoretically accentuated reason, which is based on an option of liberation, emancipation, and recognition, seeks to protect itself by its critical self-reflexivity against the constraints of subjectivation associated with an unbroken, undialectical recourse to normative categories of recognition and emancipation. However, one thing could already become clear from here: such a praxeologically sharpened form of thinking in education is needed to appropriately address ecojustice in religious education. The strong moralising charge, as I have shown in my examples of exposure pedagogy, could thus be avoided (Grümme 2021:361–410).

Conclusion and Perspectives

The question of this paper was how to deal with the tension of normativity and moralisation which can be found in the field of religious education, especially regarding the discourse of sustainability and eco-justice. Which category, which hermeneutic could help? It is the hermeneutic of self-reflective normativity as I have tried to establish in my reflections here. It advances to the sought-after category, which contextualises the inalienable postulates of the Beutelsbacher Consensus, profiled in the context of hegemonic-critical concepts, and only allows the paradoxical and counterintentional moments to be analysed, criticised and processed praxeologically. The partiality of religious education in the context of the debate about sustainable education and ecojustice can be imagined without becoming aporetic and self-contradictory in the context of simple transfer of values, overpowering or in the constraints of subjectivation and formation that are unreflected in religious education. Normatively seen, religious education is a language school of freedom, in which subjects must also be able to turn against the intentions of the teachers. Only then, as the title of an impressive book on sustainability learning in religious education, can Fridays for future become an “Everyday for future” (Bederna 2019:3) without revoking the freedom postulates of religious education in a performative way.

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