Encounter with the Other. A Theory of Otherness (Alteritätstheorie) as a Perspective for Interreligious Learning

abstract

Apart from the pluralization of religion, hardly a phenomenon is currently as challenging for religious education as the presence of foreign religions. As a result of globalization, migration and refugee movements, our present has become multicultural and multireligious. Religious education in particular must be concerned with this. In this context, interreligious learning becomes a central task of religious education. A key element here is the concept of encountering people. Children and young people should learn tolerance and openness to dialogue in the encounter with other people and at the same time being able to understand themselves better. The present reflections pursue the thesis that the encountering in interreligious dialogue is not without its problems. Often the others are constructed according to ones own ideas, and thus they are not acknowledged as being themselves. On the other hand, I am attempting to assert a theory of otherness. It relies on dialogue, but preserves the otherness of the other in the encounter, acknowledges its freedom, and in this way can prevent a "confusing recognition" (Verkennende Anerkennung) in the process of encounter. Thus the basis for a real heterogeneity of the religious pedagogy is laid

In addition to the pluralization of religion, probably no other phenomenon is currently as challenging for religious education as the presence of foreign religions. In each classroom, in the parishes, in our circles of acquaintances, the presence of people from other cultural backgrounds and other religions has become an everyday experience. Due to globalization and the migration and refugee movement, our present has become multicultural, as well as multireligious. Religious educational science in particular must be concerned with this development. However, this cannot take place through generalizing patterns. The environments and the traditions which are lived by the subjects themselves, are too plural for this. Neither Christianity, nor Judaism, nor the Islam are monolithic unities. And for all that socio-religious studies say, these already plural religions appear in a diverse spread-apart. Children and young people make use of religious traditions in different ways.¹

In addition to that, there is a further differentiation, especially on a socio-economic level. Religious traditions serve self-assurance, whether it be in adaption or distinction. Religious educator Dörthe Vieregge has impressively worked out with marginalized adolescents that the conception of God is utilized subject-constructing, identity-shaping, but also delimiting towards other social, religious and cultural milieus, other peer groups and other environments at an intensity that is outright unexpected from the perspective of the secularization theorem.

The Shell-study has pointed out similar results.\(^2\) What is challenging is that, in addition to the categories of religious plurality and cultural diversity, categories of social discrepancy take action and that these seem to penetrate in a meaningful way.

Now, considering the multi-religiosity, the approach of interreligious learning has emerged, which claims to account for this from a subject-oriented perspective.

In the light of the intensified multi-religiosity, religious education currently records a downright “boom” of this religious educational field of research.\(^3\) In doing so, not only the term is controversial.\(^4\) It is said to be “blatantly obvious that the container-term ‘interreligious learning’ demands an internal differentiation, which de facto takes place constantly, but which is scarcely characterized on the surface”.\(^5\) This extends to the apparent danger of an “interreligious diffusion of religion, or even to an interreligious culinarism”,\(^6\) which threatens to dissolve the complex claim for religious traditions to the benefit of one-dimensional processes of appropriation. Traditionally, the term of “interreligious learning” is maintained. It is said to be more open, broader, more comprehensive than the term of “interreligious education”. What is to object is that a religious concept of education highlights interreligious education’s normative determination in a greater way than the concept of upbringing and especially learning, instead of merely depicting these processes with pragmatic drift. Such a concept of interreligious education can rather incorporate upbringing and learning and align them normatively.\(^7\)

However, due to the interdependencies of multiculturality, multi-religiosity and socio-economic discrepancy, the outlined challenges raise the question of to what extent the understanding of interreligious education, which is widely established in the field of religious education, is still appropriate. According to Monika Tautz, what is meant by ‘interreligious education’ is “mostly the rehearsal into a change of perspective which esteems the other, the rehearsal into a tolerance which perceives differences and respects them as such, the acquisition of knowledge about foreign religion(s), the maturation of one’s own faith in and through the encounter with the non-Christian religion(s) […] whereby the ‘inter’ in terms of a ‘dialogical learning through encounter should take place as it were’”.\(^8\) Oriented on individuation and identity formation in a social context, such an interreligious education aims at, as Friedrich Schweitzer points out, an “ability to pluralism” which is aligned in an interreligious way.\(^9\) But how are the addressed socio-economic differences taken into account here? Should cultural differences and social divergences not already be strictly related to each other categorially in the design of interreligious education? Should, to put it more precisely, differences and disparities not be correlated, as it currently happens in the discourse of heterogeneity? Obvious-


\(^7\) Bernhard Grümme, Öffentliche Religionspädagogik. Bildung in pluralen religiösen Lebenswelten, Stuttgart 2015, 50ff.


ly, the category of the ability to pluralism is not enough here. And should not, in addition, the field be reflected critically and discourse-analytically regarding its own mechanism of construction so to speak? After all, religious education obviously already acts in the notion of a learning “among”, an “inter”, with subordinations which must still be designated reflexively. This aspect seems to be the one which represents the obstacle of interreligious education that is ignored the most. Here, this aspect is again only hinted at so far.

At this point my thesis comes into play: In this complex problematic situation, the theory of otherness und the concept of the “enlightened heterogeneity” (Katharina Walgenbach) could help along. Thus, I try to combine the debate on pluralism with the discourse on heterogeneity constructively-critical in light of the theory of otherness and make this fruitful for religious education. Such an enlightened heterogeneity is based on illuminating the mechanisms of one’s own concept-constructions self-reflectively, which is always concerned with discourse-authority and hegemonic ambition, and to then relate it to the normative objectives and alignments by means of the Christian tradition. Authority and normativity are correlated. Thus, perspectives of righteousness and acknowledgement, of cultural-religious difference and equity, of disparity and discrepancy become critically correlatable. The ability to heterogeneity is interreligious education if it targets the ability to religious perception, to religious speech, to judgement and to action, considering a contextually enrooted otherness-theoretical form of thought, and in doing so takes into account one’s own mechanisms of construction in their dialectic self-reflectively critical.

In order to elucidate and establish this greatly shortened formulated thesis, I will proceed in three steps: Firstly, I fathom religio-theological foundations; secondly, I examine the field of interreligious education for a cultuaristic shortage, in order to thirdly suggest perspectives of an enlightened heterogeneity.

1. Truth in dialogue? Theological initiation

From a theological perspective, this increasing awareness and appreciation of the non-Christian religions was facilitated by a revelation-theological burst of the ecclesiological and Christological exclusivism which has shaped the religio-theological assessments categorically over the centuries. Although the individual has all along been acknowledged the possibility to salvation, given God’s universal saving will (1 Tim 2,4) by means of theological constructs such as the Votum, the baptism of desire, as well as the figure of the anonymous Christianity, it was initially the Second Vatican Council, which became serious about this universal salvation and certified other religions as a collective at least rays of truth. In accordance with Jesus Christ, all other religions are acknowledged to be ways of salvation, depending on the extent to which they are sacred. While exclusivism amounts to the other’s conversion and mission, only such an inclusivism provides the necessary basis for interreligious education. This inclusivism appreciates the non-Christian believers as characters loved by God and dialogical counterparts, which even the Christians – irrespective of their christologically justified universal claim of truth – would have something to learn from.

But is this supposed to be a genuine dialogue, a reciprocal relationship between the religions before God? Anyhow, representatives of a pluralist theology of religion claim that a basis for

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the dialogue, which is not only necessary but also sufficient, requires a genuine reciprocity, or at least an equally-ranking standing before God, respectively the Absolute. Certainly, one must not follow the ecclesiocentric constriction of “Dominus Jesus” in order to spot this pluralist theory of religion’s inadequacy. Utterly deconstructing claims of truth run counter to the religions’ entitlement, in particular to Christianity’s claim of truth. Instead, regarding the spirit of a mutual refraction of universal salvation and apophatic theology, could not be asked whether a final theocentricism could not help to avoid a relativism in the same way as avoiding an inclusivism, which tendentially subverts a dialogue? Such a theocentric Pluralism, which has been incorporated by Georg Langenhorst in the interests of its profiling of the trialogic religious education, is in terms of religious education questionable to that extent that it provides the basis for a “presuppositionlessly open, dialogical oriented interreligious learning” as a “genuine and open search process for ultimate truths, actual insights, deepest recognitions”.12 But can interreligious learning actually remain presuppositionlessly? Does such a version of the claim of truth’s theocentricism not run contrary to its own intention of an impairment of the Christian, but also of the respectively otherwise justified and outlined Muslim and Jewish claims of truth for its part?13 Instead, the concept of truth could be grasped categorically different. This is attempted by the Comparative Theology, which has become more important for the interreligious dialogue, and in whose slipstream interreligious learning has also gained importance. Claims of truth are definitely of importance here. But they are developed in the dialogue itself, without an assumption of truth that runs ahead. The “Epistemic Humbleness”, which has been articulated by Klaus von Stosch, does not per se imply the other’s acknowledgement in his or her truth, but surely his or her “ability to truth”.14 Claims of truth thus become relevant “in view of certain religious believes within specific language-game-contexts.15 He does not turn to a religion’s complex entity as a whole, but to the miniscule individual cases, which he then condenses comparatively in terms of a criteriology of interreligious judgement, which has immanently been developed out of religious believes.16 By renouncing a landmark decision about the question which religion casts the most adequate light upon the ultimate substantiality that has been met once and for all, it is supposed to result from the process which religion is actually profitable beyond “inclusivistic taming”.17 In terms of religious education, this is momentous as it is, because by voting for the religions’ authentic representation in their elements, a vote in favor of an essential point of view of the participants, and hence in favor of a denominational approach in the broadest sense become justifiable.18 A sheer outside view in terms of religious studies is not sufficient for a degree of religious believes which is life-determining and lifeworldly rooted. Nevertheless, here too, it must be asked whether the claim of truth which has been downsized to distinct language-game’s claim of validity suffices the Christin claim of truth in itself? But could the truth not be maintained as a universal truth in that it is viewed as valid by God and its truth is to be verified historically precisely in its theocentricism? It would then be a truth of testimony, which practically tries to implement under historical-contingent conditions, which it feeds on awaitingly and by which it knows itself to be endowed and challenged in advance.19 An otherness-theoretical concept of truth, which assumes a truth that is established by otherness, would not relativize its own claim of truth, but would put it into a relation with others that is

12 Langenhorst, Trialogische Religionspädagogik 2016, 74.
14 Klaus von Stosch, Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser in der Welt der Religionen, Paderborn 2012, 168.
15 Ibid., 224.
16 Ibid., 293-317.
17 Ibid., 333.
dialogical and willing to learn, because the own truth is precisely not understood to be self-constituted. This would unbolt the inclusivism truth-theoretically, and simultaneously thwart pluralism’s relativistic drift. This could be a religio-theological basis for interreligious learning. But at the same time, what I term interreligious learning’s culturalistic drift should be thwarted.

2. Culturalism in religious education? A discourse-analytical contemplation

Evidences can be designated for this culturalistic constriction. It is regarded as imperative to analyze them in greater detail.

2.1 Intra-pluralism in interreligious learning

Interreligious learning assumes implicitly that not only religious individuals encounter each other within it, but individuals as members of religions. This assumes a religious homogeneity, and what might be termed representation-logic. Christians encounter Muslims and learn understanding, dialogue, acknowledgement by experience-saturated and knowledge-based change of perspective. In doing so, a representation is presumed that is not given according to every socio-religious study. Christian students are supposed to bring in the Christian faith within this learning through encounter, Jewish students the Jewish faith, Muslim students the Muslim faith. However, the studies clearly show that for most students in religious education classes, only a fractional identification with the Christian faith is given, which in itself is already highly plural. For a vast majority of adolescents, the Christian religion with its semantics has become a foreign religion, which they first and foremost experience from an external perspective. Lived faith and handed down faith, every-day-live religiosity and handed down religiosity diverge increasingly. Internal perspective and external perspective are difficult to distinguish and therefore also to sustain the strict distinction between religion-savvy and denominationally oriented interreligious learning, between intra- and interreligious learning consistently.

2.2 Cultural, developmental and social heterogeneity

If interreligious learning’s representation-logic disregard interreligious pluralisms, further vacancies become identifiable. These particularly reside in two aspects:

a. Can interreligious learning presume a similar culture of argumentation, of rationality and discourse from all participants? If, perhaps, Christian students which have been socialized in Catholic or Protestant religious education classes, enter into a dialogue with Muslim students, also divergent methods of dealings encounter the handling of religious traditions and Holy Scriptures: here, a learning culture that is coined rather by enlightenment, there a learning

culture that is primarily oriented on the scripture text. Learning through encounter here insinuates a symmetry of discursive and action-theoretical premises, which does not plainly exist.\textsuperscript{24}

b. Social heterogeneity

For interreligious learning, socioeconomic requirement’s sensitivity and categorial consideration should be elementarily. Not only, that a justice-problem exists in denominational religious education classes anyhow, because discrimination’s distinctly domestic and social conditions are relevant.\textsuperscript{25} This would then carry weight for interreligious learning processes, if perhaps Muslim children from socially deprived migrant families would learn together with Catholic acolytes from established households.\textsuperscript{26} Nevertheless, the issue becomes more meticulous and heterogeneous due to the interdependency of the individual factors. The sociology of education has proved the inconsideration among migrant status, discrimination and lacking educational commitment. Indeed, a correlation between success in school and migration is undeniable: the higher the degree, the lower the grade of students with a migrant background. However, while students with Turkish or Arabic migration contexts reveal rather inferior performances, it is reverse with students from Asia. Besides, the involvement in peer groups, as well as gender carry a significant weight.\textsuperscript{27}

This conflict situation indicates the interdependency and partially intensifying impact of the various dimensions of culture, religion, social status, gender, and thus shows the heterogeneity concept’s validity for interreligious learning. Not considering this interdependency would lead interreligious learning to walk right into culturalism’s trap, which locates interreligious learning within the field of culture and differences, but in doing so neglects the mechanisms and their intrinsic fixations. These already become apparent by the specific teaching structure of the teachers and their expectations and habitual attitudes. Undeniably, they contribute to discrimination and educational injustice due to their – thoroughly well-intentioned – attitudes, expectations and suppositions. If students with migrant backgrounds from socially deprived families are denied the recommendation for an academic high school (\textit{Gymnasium}) despite good grades, because they are not given credit for the necessary domestic support, then this is an issue of “institutional discrimination”,\textsuperscript{28} from which religious education classes, and thus also interreligious learning cannot be exonerated.

2.3 Essentialist attribution and didactic mechanisms of constructing

Such fixations and suppositions can for instance already be found in the expectations which are affiliated to the representation-logic. They manifest themselves there, where for instance Islamic children should bring in the Muslim prayer tradition into religious education classes. These common didactics require the attribution of religious practices (“Being a Muslim, you believe, after all…”).\textsuperscript{29} A student is identified religiously from the group of his/her classmates and is removed from his/her peer group. Starkly, this denotes the heterogeneity-discourse’s dialectics which has already been worked out, and which, encouraging participation, acknowledgement, and individualization, has a disposition to attribution, to essentializing

\textsuperscript{24} Cf. Gärtner, Auslaufmodell 2015, 216f.
\textsuperscript{26} Cf. Gärtner, Auslaufmodell 2015, 216.
\textsuperscript{27} Cf. Anna Brake, Peter Büchner, Bildung und soziale Ungleichheit. Eine Einführung, Stuttgart 2012, 50ff.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 113.
fixations, to reifications and thus to the development of stereotypes. Intentionally aimed at the acknowledgement of differences, this is produced at the same time. This logic, from which processes of acknowledgement express themselves as “misjudging acknowledgement”, is discernible in interreligious learning. Two phenomena shall be singled out illustratingly:

In an oppressive, as well as almost caricaturing way, this becomes manifest by way of example on the level of materials and schoolbooks, insofar as Judaism is for instance represented as a devout orthodox Judaism in schoolbooks, which is embodied by a Jewish boy who is wearing a kippah and dons the phylactery. Something that targets schoolbook pedagogical empathy for the peers which is appropriate to the student’s age, and that also targets a change of perspective, is, however, highly problematic on several levels: on the macro level, Judaism is perceived as a religion, which was able to evade the processes of diversification, individualization and secularization in a very opaque way. On the micro level of Judaism itself, it is displayed as a coherent construct, without even mentioning Judaism’s inner differentiations. Finally, on the micro level, it is suggested that a Jew is a devout, orthodox Jew, which is disregarded by the accelerating processes of Judaism’s inner differentiation globally, as well as in Germany. In nuce, the logic of the misjudging acknowledgement becomes blatantly visible by this example. It seeks to motivate acknowledgement, but amounts to folklorization and stereotyping.

In addition, this logic becomes apparent in the didactics of encounter. Striving for the foreign religion’s authenticity in religious education classes, because a mere cognitive, knowledge-based approach is already constricted on a learning-psychological level and does not at all correspond to the religion’s complex dimensions, it draws on the representation-logic, when it profiles “the authentic encounter, in which each religion can say and claim what is its own” to be a prominent place of interreligious education. But, is the gap between every-day-religiosity, individual religiosity and religion not embezzled here? Is didactic structure’s intrinsic logic of religious-educational practice, as can be said in Bernhard Dressler’s words, not negated and a “myth of authenticity” cultivated here? How are foreign-religious students supposed to represent their own religion? What can be contributed here, according to which criteria are they chosen among their classmates?

These analytical perspectives on interreligious learning’s, respectively interreligious education’s discourse make two things obvious in an impressive way:

a. The hermeneutic category of pluralisation does not go far enough. Using her as singular hermeneutic-analytical reference point, moves religious education on this field in a cultural drift, which enables her to perceive differences, but not inequalities and which enables her to work on them reflexively and, therefore, through which she risks to undermine her own postulates of subject orientation in the broad sense.

b. At the same time, the violation of the difference theorem, which is, as a basis of adequate perception of the otherness, elementary for the moments of change of perspectives and dialogues, becomes clear. The other is not appreciated as different, which makes one think, which irritates and enriches one’s faith. He (the other) is constructed in the mechanisms of

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practice and hermeneutics instead, which are qualified as mechanisms of power. Hence, according to Joachim Willems, should come into view in terms of Christian education “how – in everyday live, in the media, but also through offers for interreligious learning – categories of the ‘interreligious appropriate’ and, above all, of the religious different are constructed and practices of attribution are conducted, which, contrary to the agents’ intention, create the religious different in the first place and subsequently it is described in a stereotyped way and stigmatised. Also, the question, how the other is created in different dimensions (gender, ethnicity, social class etc.) at the same time, must be raised”.

What interreligious education therefore misses is a self-reflexive examination of discourses for its immanent mechanisms of identification, misjudging acknowledgement, exclusion and power. Its approaches, however, want to acknowledge more or less the otherness of the other as precondition of respect, tolerance and dialogue. But this discourse-immanent aporia is overlooked – also in the approaches that we discussed yesterday. Regardless their grave divergences and in different intensity I see also with them this desideratum – beside other open flanks we have discussed and which we can again deal with in the discussion.

3. Enlightened heterogeneity. Perspectives

The religious educational approach of the enlightened heterogeneity, in contrast, tries to handle this desideratum constructively. Finally, I will concentrate on a few aspects at the level of form of thought and religious educational practice.

3.1. Form of thought

Par excellence in interreligious education the dialectic of universality and particularity is affected. How is the other supposed to be acknowledged as the other, how is an educational process supposed to be thought of and carried out, how is tolerance supposed to be initiated, if no resistance, no positionality, which ever already transcend the subject’s comprehension and experience horizon? On the other hand: How is education supposed to happen, how is experience supposed to happen, if otherness cannot be perceived hermeneutically and cannot be presented at least to some extent in one’s own categories of comprehension? This requires an intercommunicative concept of subject as well as a reason that allows to combine both, otherness and subject. An otherness-theoretical form of thought demands to protect the other’s ability to truth and communicability through recourse to the subject’s rationality, and anchors in principle in a reason that lets itself be irritated, liberated and opened by preceding otherness. This otherness-theoretical form of thought wants to be theory by reflecting the constitutional conditions of the subjective consciousness drawing on the traditions of transcendental thoughts in a transformational way. The language theoretical and the action theoretical foundation in intersubjective, language structured liberty allows to think the theory of otherness in categories of history and society and to adhere to a concept of universal reason. Correspondingly, the concept represented here firmly adheres to the reciprocity of subject and object. Particularly the reciprocity ensures the independence of I and You, of subject and object, of relative identity and difference.

33 Willems, Joachim, Art.: Interreligiöse Kompetenz; in Wirelex 2015.
35 Summing Gärtner, Vom interreligiösen Lernen 2015, 290.
On the other hand, alterity cannot be wrapped up in dialogics in the light of the critically challenging, corrective force of the other’s unassailable strangeness. Experience is antecedently created by otherness, as much as she must be experienced and internalized by the I. Dialogics, therefore, has to be based on asymmetry. The priority of the other in dialogue breaks the dialogics’ strict reciprocity. The dialogics bursts into an interminability, into something unfathomable. The dialogics’ reciprocity is undermined by an antecedent alterity that expands the dialogics into the open. With it, it gets a drift, a downgrade. In that way, any presence is questioned again. The dialogics’ get a direction that cannot be reversed nor played down, which guarantees the authority and – in spite of all the presence – yet unassailable distance of the other in dialogue. In as much this opening can be therefore comprehend as a gift, it reveals the connectivity of the otherness-theoretical form of thought to the reflexive consideration of religious and Christian experiences.  

Challenging this dialectic theory of otherness profiled by following subject and the other, a difference theorem and thus a difference competence can be established, which enables a sound attitude towards other religions. Thereby, this attitude is self-reflexive enough because it allows to reflect on the immanent tendencies of the discourse of heterogeneity to misjudging acknowledgement, to essentializing and exclusion. This does not relieve her of this dialectic but it enables her to clarify and to treat her in a way critical of ideology.  

3.2. Practice

Concerning the consideration of the heterogenic starting point, analyses of the field of discourse are not very euphoric. Obviously interreligious learning does not have those instruments yet in order to appositely satisfy the socially, religiously and culturally highly different pupils. As well as a concept of interreligious learning for lower secondary school (Hauptschule) as well as for special-needs-school (Förderschule) and vocational school (Berufsschule) has not been developed beyond first outlines. Thereby, especially the challenges of people with educational needs in their intellectual development are serious because these people have difficulties with changing their perspectives which is necessary for interreligious learning. Esthetic didactics of a receptive, concretely acting, vividly model-like as well conceptual approach should be differentiated with regard to the group of learners and to the subjects. Transformations in simple language, like it is meanwhile Bible didactically done in the educational science of inclusion, could be useful.  

The latest didactic research inculcates impressively how closely the didactic mechanisms of discrimination in religious education and the didactic-methodical arrangements for an interreligious education with the ability to heterogeneity are connected. Accordingly, interreligious settings need theological and religious educational expertise in an intercommunicative learning process that gets teacher and student in interaction in a discriminating way. Open learning situations in self-organized learning arrangements of a religious plural class opens up “hardly...  

36 Cf. Bernhard Grümme, Öffentliche Religionspädagogik, Stuttgart 2015, 5-100.  
37 Grümme, Vom Anderen eröffnete Erfahrung 2007, 250ff.  
learning opportunities” and “fizzle out in questions of the interreligious dialogue”.\textsuperscript{40} This is interesting because the educational research prefers a very tight learning setting likewise for disadvantaged students. Through open, constructivistically taught learning arrangements they are increasingly discriminated compared to the stronger classmates.\textsuperscript{41}

What form this interreligious education in public school will take, and this is my final point, is by no means amenable to a religious education with ability to heterogeneity. Religious education demands – for the above mentioned education theoretical reasons – a participating internal perspective of the subjects, an experience-based, practical, different approach to religions. This by no means denies religion-savvy arrangements but incorporates them in an encompassing integral frame of denominational settings. In so far as positionality in religious educational terms is an integral part of religious education, it argues, regardless of the contextual requirements, rather against dialogical arrangements in class – apart from canonical conditions of the established state church.\textsuperscript{45} The denominational-cooperative religious education classes’ results in diverse evaluations, being profitable in many respects, make the initiatives to a profiling of religious-cooperative religious education classes within the subject group look very promising.

\textsuperscript{40} Gärtner, Vom interreligiösen Lernen 2015, 294.
\textsuperscript{41} Cf. Grümme, Bernhard, Ein Desiderat der Lehrerforschung; in: KatBl 2 (2016), 136-142.
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