Power, equality and difference in religious pedagogy: the underrated relation

Bernhard Grümme, Ruhr-Universität (Ruhr University) Bochum

I am beginning my lecture with an example from a schoolbook in North Rhine-Westphalia, a state in Germany where my university is. Sensitive to the mechanisms of gender-related constructions of a doing gender, they want to do justice to the individual children in their gender. Learning aids are differentiated according to gender, for example when girls are offered text exercises on pink paper and dictation exercises on blue paper with a pirate logo for boys. And the former North Rhine-Westphalian Minister of Education, Löhrmann, focused on the goal of “Learning together in diversity”, was heard in an interview as follows: “Girls tend to need an application-oriented approach, while many boys are fascinated by technology itself. In chemistry, for example, girls wanted to know above all: What do I need this for? If they know that this is interesting for cosmetics, for example, they have their own access.”¹ Do you think this is appropriate? Does this do justice to every single child? The exciting point is that a heterogeneity-capable pedagogy here wants to appreciate and acknowledge each child as itself. A heterogeneity-capable pedagogy wants to take the heterogeneity in the classroom seriously and develop a pedagogy of diversity. And yet a strange impression remains. Something is deeply problematic. Here one works with the imputation that there are natural distinctions between the sexes, which are then symbolically reinforced and normatively charged by the differentiated assignment of colors. This makes the indicated problem clear. In order to recognize individuals, to honor them, to bring justice to them, they must be identified beforehand. A real girl plays with pink dolls, a real boy is interested in technology. The interpretation of these examples may be considered hypersensitive, perhaps exaggerated or even ideologized. The mechanism in the background in dealing with heterogeneity, however, becomes blatantly visible when we play it out in the field of ethnicity, for example. In mathematics classes, Turkish children calculate with camels, Italian children with pizza. The typological stereotype becomes even clearer if we would say: “the children with a migrant background get the green worksheet, the bio-Germans the yellow one”.² So if we take this example to the extreme, the problem becomes clear: in the attempt to recognize people in their heterogeneity, recognition is also prevented. This happens behind the teachers' backs, so to

² Ibid., 126.
speak. This brings into play a factor that is usually overlooked when it comes to school and teaching: power and the connection between power, equality and difference. This connection is surprisingly also found in religious education classes. This is surprising because it directly contradicts the fundamental ethos of religious education classes to do justice to every human being as a child of God and to help them to develop their possibilities. But the problem is that this happens if we do not examine our own practice, our thinking and behavior self-critically. If we do not clarify our attitude to heterogeneity self-critically, i.e. if we do not develop enlightened heterogeneity, then we remain blind to the mechanisms of power and devaluation, which is the theses defended in this lecture. In order to justify and explain this thesis, first the concept of power is to be analyzed in more detail using Foucault's theory of discourse (1) and then hegemonic power-related tendencies illustrated using the example of interreligious learning (2), in order finally to open up a further perspective with the category of enlightened heterogeneity (3).

1. Education as pastoral power

In view of far-reaching changes in cultural, economic and social self-understanding processes, the focus is increasingly on education. Understood by some as a “secularized religion,” others point out that educational processes as a whole “are anything but a power-free space.” For Michel Foucault, too, the question arises as to why, despite the empathetic promises of autonomy, subjectivization and maturity, these very promises are not fulfilled through education. Discourse-theoretically, he exposes the educational system: “In a society such as ours, education may de jure be an instrument that allows every individual access to every kind of discourse - but we know that in its distribution, in what it allows and in what prevents it, it follows the lines drawn by social differences, opposites and struggles. Every educational system is a political method to maintain or change the appropriation of discourses with their knowledge and power.” According to discourse theory, there is therefore an intrinsic connection between the power and education of subjects, since these are “the great procedures of subjugation of discourse.” What applies to the court system, the judicial system, psychiatry, even to the literary act of writing, which is generally

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3 Konrad Paul Liessmann, Bildung als Provokation, Wien 2017, 36.
5 Michel Foucault, Schriften III, Frankfurt a.M. 2003, 29f.
considered free and creative, applies not least to schools and universities: “What is actually a
teaching system - if not a ritualization of the word, a qualification and fixation of roles for the
speaking subjects, the formation of an at least diffuse doctrinal group, a distribution and
appropriation of discourse with its power and knowledge.”\(^6\) Another example from school lessons
can illustrate this:

Inclusive classes where disabled and non-disabled students, students with lower and higher
performance learn together: The teacher distributes work tasks. In order to proceed in a student-
oriented manner, the teachers distribute tasks and materials that have the same target but strongly
differ in methods and levels. However, as a prerequisite for this, the children must first be
identified in their cognitive level and their motivation to learn and then explicitly named, but at
least in the distribution of the differentiated materials the cognitive level and the motivation to
learn must be performatively named. In this way, however, derogatory distinctions are already
made in the learning group and categories of power are applied. To better understand this, we turn
to Michel Foucault's theory of discourse.

With regard to the linguistic-analytic reflections of confessional conversations, Foucault wants to
expose such mechanisms in educational processes as subtle exercises of power. Their subtle
power mechanisms consist in the fact that power-shaped structures of society assert themselves in
such a way that the subjects believe they are free. Such leadership is “not based on coercion, but
on a willingness to let oneself be guided”. It is based on the practice of what must seem
paradoxical from the point of view of liberal self-determination: “voluntary bondage as the
highest form of individual freedom.”\(^7\) In the subjects' search for autonomy, an asymmetry is
reproduced that Foucault calls “pastoral power”.\(^8\) As the confessor together with the penitent, as
the 'shepherd' together with the 'sheep' affirms the order of confession and spiritual guidance, so
the power of discourse prevails. Accordingly, “education itself can be read as a social
transformation through individual formation and thus as a specific form of 'leadership of
guidances' (Foucault).”\(^9\) The inner connection between power and education is that education

\(^6\) Ibid., 30; cf. Bröckling, Gute Hirten führen sanft 2017, 15–73.
\(^7\) Bröckling, Gute Hirten führen sanft 2017, 22.
\(^8\) Cf. Michel Foucault, Das Subjekt und die Macht; in: Dreyfus, Hubert L. et al. (eds.), Michel Foucault. Jenseits von
Friedrich Schweitzer, Interreligiöse Bildung. Religiöse Vielfalt als religionspädagogische Herausforderung und
Chance, Gütersloh 2014, 120–126.
ultimately cultivates self-control and thus introduces it to power contexts that are reproduced behind the backs of subjects. Education and power must therefore be thought critically together in order to be able to deconstruct this discourse power. “Thus, not only modern pedagogy in general, but especially the figure of 'education' can be understood as a central moment of secularized pastoral power, whose fertility and effectiveness lies precisely in making one's own forming access to the way of life of the people themselves unrecognizable in the rejection of foreign determination and repression and in passing it off as 'representative concern'.

In the background is a discourse-theoretical concept of power. Michel Foucault's poststructuralism places theories and concepts in the context of practice and social distinctions. Fixed meanings, ontological attributions, non-historical, quasi natural essentializations, descriptions of essence are dissolved and ascribed to the power of discourses to determine meaning. Every speech, every action, every thinking gains its significance in concrete hermeneutic conflicts, which are shaped by the dynamic and highly complex structure of knowledge and interest in the sign of social and cultural hegemony and political power. The microphysic type of power in Foucault’s theory requires, that every society controls and produces at the same time the discussion and also organizes and selects it by using procedures, which have the main task to control the dangers and power of discussion, to banish its incident type and bypass its materialism. That is why “speaking” is meant to be a relative and might-productive speaking. To discover, show up and counteract this social mechanics in an ideological way is what Foucault wants his concept of “discourse analysis” to do.

So the point of discourse analysis is discursive articulation. In this power critical analysis the question is how terms are embossed, which meanings are implemented, which mechanics of exclusion, inclusion and hierarchy are performed in discourse. In doing so the following aspect can be seem as axiomatic base: There is no in itself valid verity. There is nothing fixed. Verity is produced by a discourse, which is dominated by power structures.

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This implies not only epistemological consequences, but although heavy implications in the theory of subjects. The characters are molded in an always precarious discourse of normative power, search for identity and discursive dispute.\textsuperscript{15} The relation of self and world stays in performative practices of its execution involved.\textsuperscript{16}

This shapes the intersubjective process of constitution of world and self in a performative way. Concerning this, power is not just hetero-norm imposed. Power can only be wield on free individuals, but only, when they are really free.\textsuperscript{17} It works by getting affirmed and forms characters. „Diese Form der Macht gilt dem unmittelbaren Alltagsleben; sie teilt die Individuen in Kategorien ein, weist ihnen ihre Individualität zu, bindet sie an ihre Identität und erlegt ihnen das Gesetz einer Wahrheit auf, die sie in sich selbst und die anderen in ihnen anzuerkennen haben. Diese Machtform verwandelt die Individuen in Subjekte“.\textsuperscript{18} (This type of power applies in everyday life; it separates characters in categories, gives them their individuality, builds their identity and gives them their variety, which they have to recognize in themselves and in others. This type of power creates individuals as subjective characters.)

So the subjective character is in a power led process of social discourse and performative practice of “subjectivation“ to be constituted.\textsuperscript{19}

2. Learning interreligiously as a hegemonic way of speaking?

Those observations, even though they seem to be abstract, have an enormous relevance in practical process for R.E. This is emphasized in the field of globalization and migration, which shows up how important interreligious learning is. This is meant to be illustrated in a few words. This emphasizes that categories of distinction are not sufficient. It also has to be dealt with inner relations of differences and questions of equality.

\textsuperscript{18} Foucault, Schriften IV 2005, 275; Forst, Normativität und Macht 2015, 75.
What is meant by ‘interreligious education’ is according to the German scholar Monika Tautz “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’." 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.

But there are some problematical aspects.

1.1 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, recognition by experience-based and knowledge-based change of perspective. In doing so, a representation is presumed that is not given according to every socio-religious study. 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.

1.2 Cultural, developmental and social heterogeneity

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

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21 Friedrich Schweitzer, Interreligiöse Bildung 2014, 133.

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.23

For interreligious learning, socioeconomic requirement’s sensitivity and categorical 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.24 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.25 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.26

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 (*Gymnasium*) despite good grades, because they are not given credit for the necessary domestic support, then this is an issue of “institutional discrimination”,\(^{27}\) from which religious education classes, and thus also interreligious learning cannot be exonerated.

1.3 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…”).\(^{28}\) 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 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”,\(^{29}\) is discernible in interreligious learning. One phenomenon shall be singled out illustratively:

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

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 113.


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.

This analytic perspectives of discourse of interreligious learning emphasizes:

a. The hermeneutical category of pluralization, which has dominated the field of interreligious learning, is not sufficient. So far it has been focused on cultural and religious differences. Questions of equality and recognition and the interdependence between difference and inequality have been ignored. Hermeneutics of pluralization used as a singular hermeneutic and analytic point of reference gives Religious Education a culturalistic drift, which makes it able to be sensitive for differences, but on the same way enables it to realize and reflect on inequalities, so it could avoid its own postulation of character orientation.

b. On the same way failure of the margin proposition is shown. So interreligious didactic is fundamental important for recognition of otherness, change of perspective and dialogue. The other is not appreciated as the other, who gives new boost, who can irritate and enhance the faith. But the other is constructed by mechanics of experience and hermeneutics, which are mechanics of power. That is why Joachim Willms wants to guide the view of religious pedagogy "how – in everyday life, but also in offers of interreligious learning – categories of “interreligious reasonable” and religious different are created and categorizations are fulfill, which make the religious different to the religious different, contrary to the participants intentions and in this consequence, creating stereotypes and stigmatization.

There it has to be asked, how the other is made in different dimensions (gender, ethnic, social class)". 30

Concerning this, interreligious education misses is a self-reflective review of the discourse on its discourse immanent mechanics of identification, misjudging recognition, the exclusion, the

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power. This aspects are meant to recognize the otherness as a condition for respect, tolerance and dialogue. But this discourse immanent is often ignored.

3. Enlightened heterogeneity as a perspective for the sustainability of R.E.

With these few statements the following should be considerable: If religious pedagogy wants to fulfill its own postulations of orientation of character and education, it has to deal with a sophisticated discourse of legitimation and justification, which not at least has to reflect its own item concept. Religious pedagogy has to become sensitive for hegemonic leanings and phenomenons of power, which still are recognizable in itself, even when it introduces a normative and value donating tradition of a liberating god. In this way, religious pedagogy is asked in its fundamental theoretical principles.

When it is about learning conditions, when it is about structure and aim of religious learning processes and about the consideration of multinational conditions of religious educational procedures, when it is about inclusion, about interreligious learning, about religious pluralism and the decline of sex and gender in construction of god semantics, when it is about even these didactic and methodical designs of Religious Education and other fields of religious pedagogy or even school's pastoral work: the discourse of heterogeneity seems to be heavier than the meaning of pluralism for religious pedagogy and it's connectivity.

As a central criteria “Enlighted heterogeneity” can apply. “Enlighted heterogeneity” postulates a critical reflexive reflection beside its contextual conditions and practical and theoretical connotation. It asks for influences of power on the own educational action, that is apparent, where the gospel is meant to be shown. This Enlightened heterogeneity is based on mechanics of the term construction and its self-reflection that has always to do with the power of discourse and obtain it on the normative personal goal statements and orientations of Christian tradition. Power and normativity are controlled. In this way, perspectives of justice and recognition, of cultural and religious difference and equality, of inequality and variety are critically are with regard to

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each other. It is quite obvious that disabled children from wealthy families have other compensation measures and possibilities of support, as children from social and cultural contexts of discrimination. When there are types of learning preferred in inclusive R.E., that allow children to work with different methods on the same matter, students with larger resources have a better chance of participation. A special representative office of disabled people with migration background can be shown by empirical survey. The multiple differentiation and their dynamisation and interdependences of the differences and inequalities of disabilities and poverty, sex and migration can be related and discussed by Enlighted heterogeneity.

This Enlighted heterogeneity is sufficient self-reflexive, because of its drift of the including discourse to misjudging recognition to essentialization and exclusion. This does not relieve it of dialectics. Every lesson of Religious Education, every planning and reflection connects to this problem. The Enlighted heterogeneity qualifies, to resolve ideological critical and edit it in pedagogic and didactic. The often oppressive implications of some R.E. teachers can be analyzed in this way. Maybe the category of “Enlighted heterogeneity” can be a contribution to give it sustainability.

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