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Henk Kuindersma (Ed.)

# POWERFUL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS
# AND THEOLOGIZING AND PHILOSOPHIZING
# WITH CHILDREN

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Henk Kuindersma (Ed.)

# Powerful Learning Environments and Theologizing and Philosophizing with Children

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# Introduction

# Child Theology: a Second International Conference

This volume contains the contributions to *Conference of Powerful Learning Environments & Theologizing and Philosophizing with Children*.

This conference was the second international meeting of pedagogues of Religious Education (RE) in Europe who are interested in child theology and child philosophy.

The conference took place on 4 – 7 April, 2011 at the Protestant Theological University in Kampen, the Netherlands.

The first international conference of pedagogues of RE was held in September 2009 in Loccum, Germany. The focus of that first meeting was on the research that addressed how we can reflect on the engagement of children in theological and philosophical conversations and how to understand the processes of theologizing and philosophizing with children. A third interesting area was also discussed, namely how to stimulate a culture of teaching which places children's fundamental questions at the centre of religious pedagogical actions.

The contributions to the conference at the Religious Pedagogical Institute (RPI) in Loccum in 2009 were published in a volume entitled *Symmetrical Communication. Philosophy and Theology in Classrooms across Europe*.[1] The participants at the conference in Loccum shared perspectives on learning processes, and dealt with each other's questions regarding the value and the meaning of the views of children.

It appeared crucial to understand that against the background of different societies, subject orientation in RE goes hand in hand with democratic learning in theological and philosophical conversations with children.

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[1] Friedhelm Kraft, Hanna Roose, Gerhard Büttner (Eds.), *Symetrical communication and Philosophy and Theology in Classrooms acrosse Europe*, RPI Loccum 2011.

Another inspiring meeting with expert discussions on RE and child theology throughout Europe was held in 2011 in Kampen[2] with the leading title: *Powerful Learning Environments & Theologizing and Philosophizing with Children*. The conference focused on two main questions:

- what do we mean by the concept of a powerful learning environment?
- what is the meaning of powerful learning environments for the practices of theologizing and philosophizing with children?

The conference as a whole at the PThU in Kampen consisted of two parts:

- an expert conference
- an open conference day.

*The expert conference*

During the expert conference, twenty-five participants discussed:
- the didactic preconditions and elements for teaching RE from the perspective of a powerful learning environment
- examples of 'good' subject materials – stories, artefacts, textbooks, films and so on – to stimulate philosophizing and theologizing with children.

Examples of successful theologizing and philosophizing with children were shown in transcripts or on videos. Special interest in the sessions was given to 'subject learning' and the interaction among the children as well the interaction among children and teachers.

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[2] The third International Conference is planned in April 2013 in Trondheim, Norway under the title Children's voices - theological, philosophical and spiritual perspectives.

*The open conference*

The open conference on 7 April, which was also held at PThU Kampen, attracted a surprising number of interested people. A hundred and thirty colleagues of RE from the Netherlands and Belgium attended a presentation of the state of the art in philosophizing and theologizing with children in Europe - lecturers in teacher training, representatives of education boards, teachers in primary education and youth workers in the church.

The open conference day offered these visitors:

1. an orientation regarding theologizing and philosophizing with children and subsequent perspectives on new developments
2. examples, good practices, theologizing and philosophizing with children in workshops.

*Contributions*

Below the reader can find a brief introduction to the various contributions at the expert conference and the open conference day.

**a. The expert conference**

Presentations:

*Johan Valstar* provided a clarification of the concept "Powerful Learning Environment". He also made a significant advancement in answering the key question: how can we develop a powerful learning environment? Johan Valstar himself chooses the model of elementarization by Nipkow and

Schweitzer as a helpful 'instrument' which he supplements with the element of 'incentive'.

*Evert Jonker* outlined what a powerful learning environment might look like. The teacher must take into account the concepts of time and space. Children live in the present. The language game is very important in this regard. In Religious Education we see a mix of everyday language and religious language. The teacher must therefore always switch – leap - from one language game to the other.

According to Evert Jonker, both the child and the teacher are part of the learning environment. The teacher's task is to encourage people in narrative identity and in responsiveness to the mystery of life and Christian faith.

*Brian Gates* presented his long-term research into the use of religious references. In the beginning of his career he studied children's references. In his study he came to the conclusion that children are by nature theologians. Religious references are part of their being. They spontaneously think about religion; however, they need to be supplied with experiences and themes to think about. Recently he undertook further research with the children who had grown up in the meantime. One of the first conclusions of this follow-up research was that the religious language in which children are raised is often retained. His question, however, is this: will the new generation still encounter religious references in the United Kingdom (UK)?

*Elisabet Haakedal* discussed the results of her research into the religious development of Sofie (13-15 years), a secondary school pupil. Her research question is whether a textbook plays a significant role in the establishment of a religious learning environment. Haakedal concluded that the textbook in the Norwegian context is very important. It provides a means of communication between student and teacher. The textbook in question

proved to be a good tool for Religious Education: education that guides individuals in their spiritual quests.

*Dana Hanesova* provided an introduction to Slovak Religious Education. Theologizing with children is still in its infancy. Slovak teachers, however, are developing a different view of their pupils. Children are no longer seen as passive objects but as active subjects. This new way of looking at children can aid Slovakian Religious Education to implement the activity of theologizing with children. By using a trial-and-error method, Dana Hanasova herself is looking for opportunities to theologize with children.

*Sturla Sagsberg* studied the 'concept' child. His thesis is that only through a renewed understanding of the role of the child is 'child theology' possible. Only if the child is considered as a subject with its own voice, is children's theology and theologizing with children possible.

**b. The open conference day**

Presentations:

*Elisabeth E. Schwarz and Katharina Kammeyer* explained in a creative, joint presentation "the basics" of philosophizing and theologizing with children.
Theologizing and philosophizing with children is 'open ended'.
Children, according to many studies, find philosophical and theological conversations fun. Why? They do not have the same constraints as adults do and are in a process of development. What is more, they are not on their own. They are well supported in their discussions of questions and content. In other words, 'theological' impulses at the right time will help them to discover meanings.

*Gerhard Büttner* gave an inspiring presentation about how stories have a dual role in the educational process - stories make one think and stories help one to understand the world and oneself better. But stories are also "playthings for the soul." Children and adolescents can use stories to organize their identity better. Büttner gives examples of these aspects of using stories in learning environments.

*Workshops:*

*Anton Vandeursen* started with the thesis: for centuries, people have been looking for answers to many questions. Who are we? How should we live? What is this world, and what does it all mean for my life? The big questions of philosophy are questions of all men of all times and ages, hence, of children as well. Children ask themselves and the world a variety of questions. Philosophizing together gives them the opportunity to look at their answers and to examine and test their existing knowledge. The participants in the workshop experienced how this can be done.

*Friedhelm Kraft & Hanna Roose* spoke about the 'adventure' of Christology that invites us to discover a mystery with the children. More specifically, to discover Jesus as the Christ and the mystery of God. Working on this secret is a trip to a vast, open country. In the Christological journey to the land of faith, one develops an interpretation of life and relationships. This process is not so much about accepting faith and making statements of confession. Rather it is a conversation about the question: "Who is Jesus for me? What is his significance for us today?"

*Pieter Vos* began his workshop with an introduction to the ethics of virtue and the theological significance and pedagogical relevance of these ethics. The participants then discussed the conditions for and implementation of an

ethical educational practice. How can virtues be practiced in the formal and informal curriculum? How can a virtue be the focus in a powerful learning environment? What role does 'philosophizing' play in that process? And what does this mean for the role of the teacher?

*Henk Kuindersma*'s workshop comprised the use of songs and poems in theologizing with children, which are practices from Dutch schools. Participants did the same tasks as the children and discussed their experiences in direct contact with the experiences of the children. Poetic language often expresses in a few words the essence of religious themes and meanings, which is an important motive for working with songs and poems. In addition, children enjoy to sing and children also enjoy poems. Children have their own songs and poems and children create their own poems and songs.

Henk Kuindersma

Johan Valstar

# 1. The Quest for Powerful Learning Environments.

# Children's Theology & Elementarization

This contribution is similar to the panels of a triptych divided into three sections intended to be appreciated together. The middle panel: (2) *The Elementarization model* is typically the largest. It is flanked by two wing panels: (1) *The quest* and (3) *Domain-specific considerations*.

## *1.1. The Quest*

### Powerful Learning Environments

When we look back at the past decade, we may establish the fact that the Child theological approach has developed into a leading paradigm at a surprisingly rapid rate. Initially, exploration was mostly geared towards scientific reflection of (1) experimental educational practices, and (2) the



nature, the content and the added value of children's theological conversations.[3] Meanwhile we are able to identify and develop first thoughts into a more far-reaching concept in which (3) the subject Child's

theological learning environment is the focus. This metaphorical description denotes the more comprehensively arranged educational context wherein students actively follow variable learning pathways. The corresponding perspective of *powerful learning environments* (abbreviation: *PLEs*) was first explicitly coined during the second International Children's Theological Conference (2011) held in Kampen, Netherlands. The particular PLE

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[3] cf. Henning Schluss, 2008.

concept focuses on knowledge construction instead of knowledge transmission, on competencies instead of declarative information, and on social exchange instead of individual learning. PLEs enable, elicit or afford suitable learner activities and engage learners intrinsically in their learning processes.[4]

The formal invitation to the conference *'Powerful Learning Environments and Theologizing & Philosophizing with Children'* clarified that those who organized the event had chosen an approach aimed at the importance of powerful impulses such as evocative media, materials or incentives with intents to enhance student's learning processes. More extended frameworks and ideas about the design and arrangements of powerful learning environments were referred in passing.

**Caveat**

The question: 'How to create a powerful Child theological learning environment?' leads us into yet relatively unexploited territories of religious pedagogy and didactics. In due course this could finally result in the design of innovative methodological approaches, but the promising perspective of innovation requires a sense of reality. Educational transformation is full of snags. No matter what interesting ideas, concepts designs and practices with respect to PLEs are presented, acceptance and ensuing implementation by workers in the educational field ultimately remains a critical factor. The defining features of PLEs[5] are usually supposed to have

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[4] De Corte et al. 2003; Gerjets & Hesse 2004; Dochy et al. 2005; Könings et al. 2005.
[5] Herewith a short description (Dochy et al. 2005) of seven defining features of powerful learning environments:"(1) Learning is more important than instruction. (2) Teaching is no longer the transmission of knowledge, but is rather supporting students to actively construct knowledge by assigning them tasks that enhance this process. (3) The significance of learners' previous knowledge, beliefs and conceptions, because learners construct new knowledge on the basis of their existing knowledge. (4) Co-operative learning includes the need for emphasis on negotiation and sharing of meanings through discussion and different forms of collaboration. (5) Authentic problems are the starting point of the learning process. (6) Learning is contextualized. Knowledge is partly the result of the specific activity, the context and the culture in which that knowledge is acquired. (7) Assessment is not a separate activity, only performed at the end of the course; the assessment procedures have to be integrated in the learning process itself. Assessment should focus on authentic tasks and take into account learners` individual orientations and foster their meta-cognitive skills."

positive effects on student learning. But teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching do influence the implementation of any PLE. Changing practices presupposes new conceptual perspectives, a certain degree of dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and on the other side of the spectrum, the presence of a better alternative. The teachers concerned need to experience alternatives at least as intelligible and plausible, and moreover clearly as added value, which should primarily result in increasing educational outcomes on the part of the pupils.[6] These types of prerequisites may be experienced as a caveat.

**Multiple examples**

Nevertheless, powerful learning environments in the domain of Religious Education spell out a real possibility. As a matter of fact, multiple examples of PLEs on the level of primary education can be found in Rainer Oberthür's remarkable book '*Kinder fragen nach Leid und Gott*' (1998). Exemplary is his 35-page description of a thematic series of lessons on prophets. Speaking of educational outcomes; pupils following these lessons actually come to the conclusion that they themselves can become prophets.

This particular lesson series was used by the primary education department of the Windesheim School of Education (2006 – 2009) as introduction to the new paradigm of Children's Theology.

The prospective teachers, who were introduced to 'the Oberthür approach', found it a very inspiring alternative to the conventional Dutch methods used in Religious Education. It is important to know that Oberthür didn't just rely on his indisputable pedagogical and didactic talents when it comes to learning environments. The *'Tübinger Model Elementarisierung'*[7] guided him in the development of Child's theological learning environments.

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[6] Valstar, 1996.
[7] Schweitzer et al. 1995.

## *1. 2. The Elementarization Model*

**Introduction**

Those who are bold enough to design elementary and powerful learning environments that are suitable for learning processes, are faced with a complex challenge. In principle this challenge can only be taken up on the basis of a comprehensive domain-specific concept that is relevant to daily practice. In a manner of speaking, such a concept is as essential as the rudder is to a ship. In other words: it is only after having met the condition of an encompassing model that we may rely on the results of an innovative development process. Naturally there are many different preconditions. However, we will not go into those within the limited scope of this contribution. We do confine ourselves to a short introduction of the original German and the adapted Dutch version of the *Elementarization model,* and the cardinal aspect of *theological conversations with children,* adapted from Petra Freudenberger-Lötz.[8] Those conversations can be realized in a triple way conform the conceptual triad proposed by Friedrich Schweitzer.[9] Lastly, if educational concepts are to be effective and true to their own intentions, theory and praxis have to go hand in hand. Subsequently an outline is offered that might be inspiring with respect to the development of powerful learning environments.

**On the origin of Elementarization**

When we take the topic of Elementarization in consideration, we especially need to refer first to the German educationalist and teacher educator Wolfgang Klafki.[10] He proposed his 'theory of the elementary' and his congruent 'didactic analysis' in the 1960s. Klafki maintains that each teacher, when developing any lesson plan, should constantly ask him/herself whether the intended content knowledge will really benefit the

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[8] Freudenberger-Lötz, 2007.
[9] Schweitzer, 2003.
[10] Valstar, 2007.

students. In a bid to unravel the problem and possibly point the way towards an answer, Klafki formulated the following five interrelated questions on the intrinsic value and pedagogic relevance of the contents:

1) *What is the exemplary relevance?*
2) *What is the current relevance to the students?*
2) *What is the relevance for the future?*
3) *How are questions 1 and 2 reflected in the subject matter?*
5) *How is the subject matter opened up to the students?*

In the 1960s it was not exactly customary to ask basic questions like the ones above. Mainstream views on teaching and learning were characterized by a strong emphasis on the transfer of established knowledge without a second thought to whether the selected subject matter would be relevant to the students. Klafki put the question about the exemplary relevance to first place, thereby demonstrating that he wanted to replace the classic ideal of knowledge as an encyclopedic collection of facts with the ideal of knowledge as a formative process.

Wolfgang Klafki questioned the 'unquestioned' nature of knowledge. His questions and propositions resulted in new perceptions of content knowledge and new preparation techniques, not to mention a form of education that the students personally experienced as more useful. Klafki, who saw no value in heavily laden curricula and wanted *qualitative added value* in existing education, argued for elementary knowledge which should be presented in an *exemplary manner* ('less is more').

He assumed that elementary subject matter was, in fact, a combination of: a) whatever can be regarded as *fundamental and representative for the subject*, and b) whatever makes an *essential contribution* to the students' development. Klafki used this combination to build a persuasive case for *an exemplary approach to elementary subject matter*. According to Klafki, an exemplary approach to elementary subject matter would provide scope for

education as a formative process. He expressed this in the dual principle of Kategoriale Bildung (categorical education):

- Education should be geared to *opening reality* for the students;
- Conversely, students should be afforded opportunities to *open themselves* to their own reality.

The dual process does justice to the importance of elementary subject matter on the one hand and to the development of the student on the other. In recent decades this dual principle has been further developed by Nipkow and Schweitzer. Their model is also discernible as a frame of reference with respect to *theological conversations with children,* conform the principles and procedures developed by Freudenberger-Lötz.[11]

**Tübinger Elementarization model**

To explain in the Elementarization model in detail herewith some essential aspects. The Tübinger edition, as elaborated by Nipkow & Schweitzer serves as a multi-pointed compass to form a multilayered frame for the purposes of both planning and analyzing Religious Education processes. The model requires an intertwining analysis of the following aspects: (1) *Elementary structures* of the instructional content. (2) *Elementary experiences*, as involved in the worlds of the past and the present. (3*) Elementary accesses* to understand children from their developmental and biographical experiences. (4) *Elementary truths (or meaning of life)*, resulting from different perspectives, for instance: from religious traditions and from the part of the children. And finally: (5) *Elementary learning activities*, which may support meaningful religious learning.

**V&O Elementarization model**

Based on own experimental research, explorations and experiences with prospective teachers in Windesheim School of Education (2006 - 2007) the

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[11] Freudenberger-Lötz, 2007.

Tübinger Model was adapted and dynamically modified and finally published in the RE-Handbook 'Verwonderen & Ontdekken' [Amazement & Discovery][12].[13]

The Dutch version of the Elementarization model is geared essentially as a toolbox to engaging the (prospective) teachers in the core activity of theological discourse and to help them to discover new and relevant perspectives and to find possible answers to basic (life)questions (Schweitzer, 2000).[14]

A remarkable new didactic extension in the Dutch model is the complementary scope of the component (6) *Elementary Incentives & media.*[15] As we know, theological conversations do not just happen 'out of the blue'. They are dependent on *incentives*, in whatever *medial form* (and subsequent processes), which evoke a certain kind of intrinsic motivation, by which the pupils *as if by magic* begin to experience a strong sense of involvement with their learning process. Thanks to the incentive(s) discussed, pupils observe something special, which creates the excitement of challenging questions that require an as yet unknown solution. This releases a dynamics in them comparable to the operation of a flywheel. In short, through 'incentives' special moments of learning are caught sight of.[16]

To avoid misunderstanding, an incentive is not meant to be a loose piece of fireworks that catches the pupil's attention like a rocket. Incentives are located in the broader context of the usual educational trajectories. An incentive causes a sudden attentiveness in the pupils and the awakening of

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[12] Valstar & Kuindersma, 2008.

[13] Discovering Rainer Oberthür's good practices in 2006 as well as the reference frameworks he used, inspired a conceptual adaptation. Afterwards did the idea arise that the core activity, namely having theological conversations with children (Freudenberger-Lötz, 2007), should be integrated within the Dutch version of the Elementarization model. The results of didactic applications and modifications of the  model were presented during the international EAWRE forum held in Vienna in 2007. The final edition served as the conceptual framework for the Children's theological RE-handbook Verwonderen & Ontdekken.

[14] Schweitzer, 2000.

[15] 'Incentive' derives from the Latin verb 'incendere', meaning 'to set fire to', or 'to inflame'.

[16] cf. Freudenberger-Lötz, 2004.

a research attitude. They feel challenged to delve into the question/problem at hand in more detail. In this situation the teacher should refrain from providing 'the correct answers'. The learning process of the pupils gains depth and significance when they search for possible answers and solutions in a concerted effort with other pupils and the teacher. When the pupils are given enough room to maneuver, there may be a fertile soil in the group for personal discoveries. Although, it is of course a wonderful experience to see 'the coin drop'; this is not the end but the starting-point for the next step of the learning process. What now matters is a further extension of the newly acquired ideas and to share them with and anchor them in the group of pupils as a whole. Learning within the learning environment may thus become a joint explorers' event.

## V&O Elementarization toolbox

As shown below, the diagram indicates two subject-specific dimensions of RE. The six elementary interconnected components / perspectives imply a



Elementarization V&O model

Actual life dimension of students

Learning activities

Life experiences

theological conversations with children

Meaning of life

Accesses

Structure & context

Incentives & Media

Dimension of Bible & traditions

Adapted from K.E. Nipkow / F. Schweitzer & P. Freudenberger – Lötz.                    © Johan G. Valstar 2007.
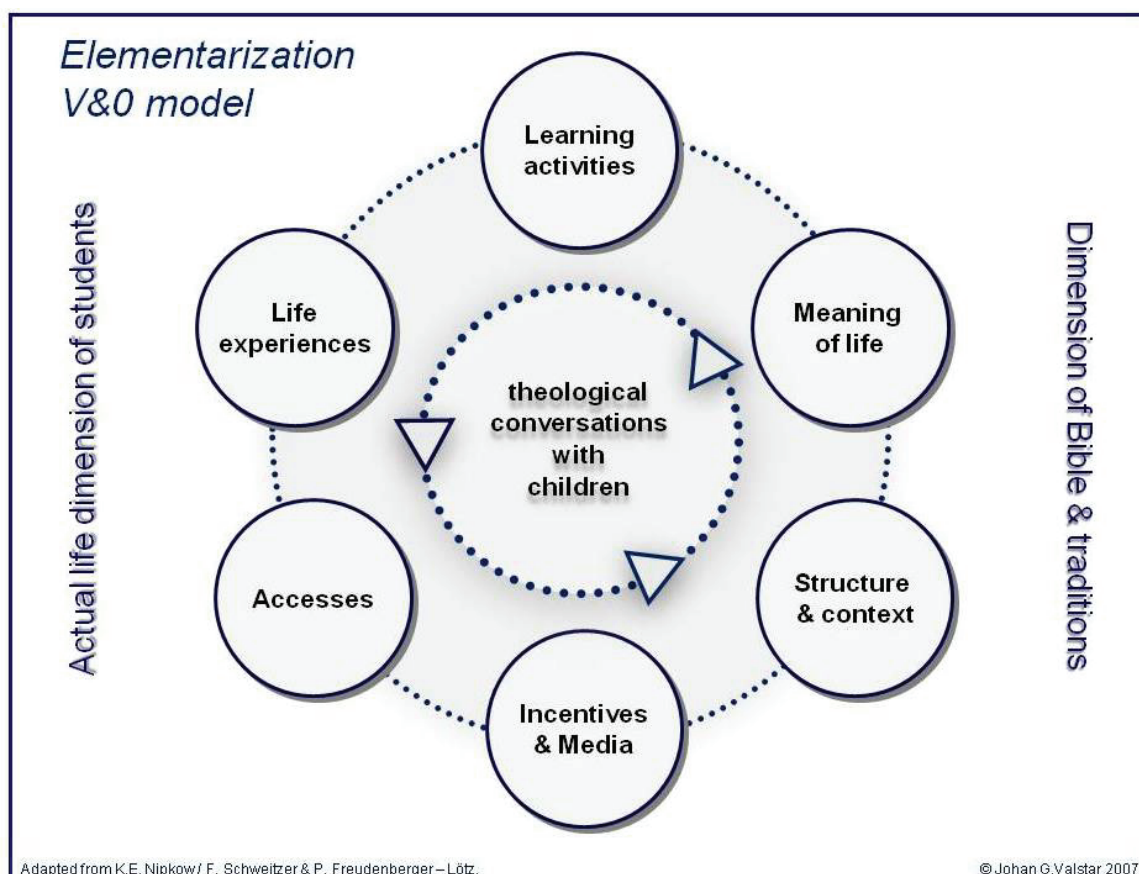
network of thirty potential relationships. When the teacher plans the learning process she / he has a 360-degree perspective.

In other words, the overall architecture of the V&O Elementarization model takes simultaneous account of the two domain-specific dimensions *and* the six elementary components, whose interrelationships determine the pattern of the learning processes. In the inner circle theological conversations with children act as the pulsating heart of the V&O model.

The cyclical dynamics of the model (as opposed to linear options) provide heuristic opportunities to design and realize processes of learning and teaching.

**Theological conversations: triple entry**

Religious pedagogical communication with children may be seen as the pulsating heart of child theological reform. For a concrete development of



*Elementarization Triple entry*

Teacher

Actual life dimension of students

DEVELOPMENTAL LEARNING PROCESSES

DOMAIN - SPECIFIC CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

Dimension of Bible & traditions

theological conversations with children

EXPERIENCES – PRECONCEPTIONS - INCENTIVES

Students

Theme

Adapted from F. Schweitzer / P. Freudenberger – Lötz.

© Johan G. Valstar 2007.
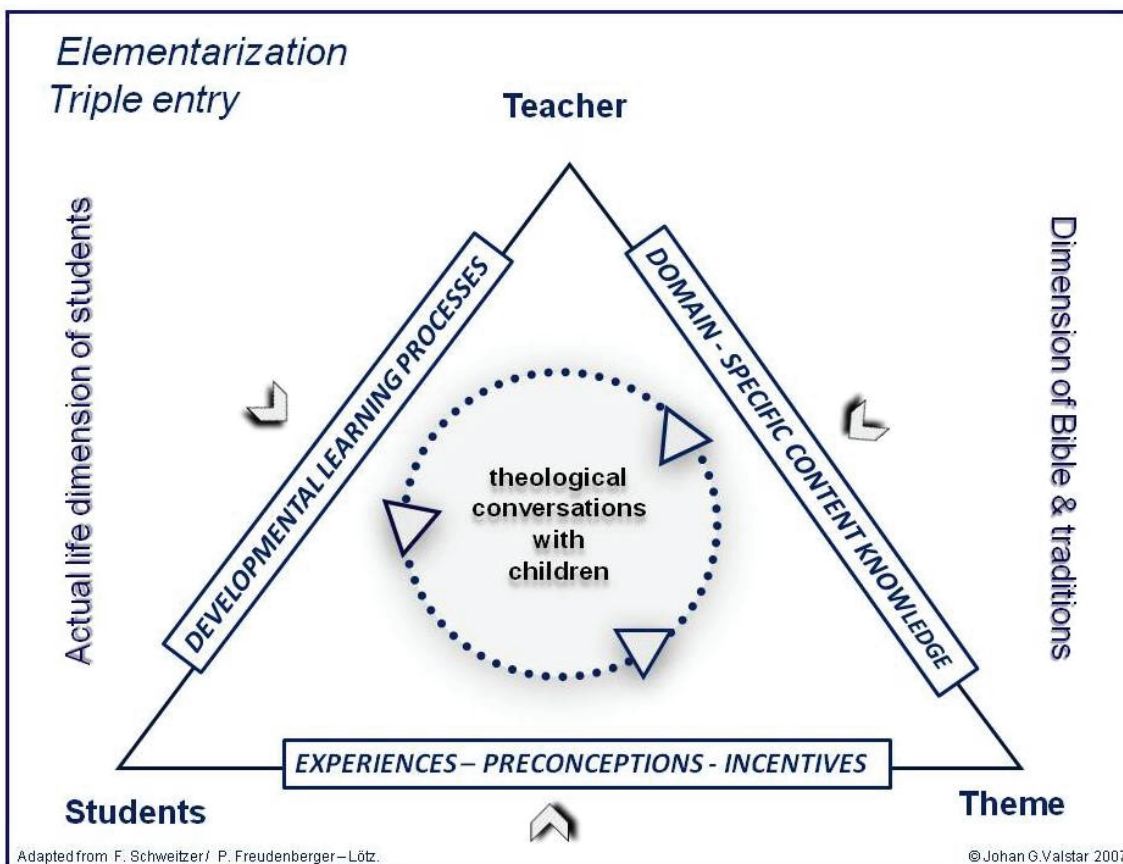
the communicative act we can refer to the *conceptual triad* or *the triple entry* of Friedrich Schweitzer.[17] He defines Theologizing with children as a threefold process, in which activities under the denominators of (a) Theologizing *of* children, (b) Theologizing *with* children, and (c) Theologizing *for* children are shaped in various and complementary ways. Petra Freudenberger – Lötz, as a specialist in children's theology and teacher educator, has linked Schweitzer's triad to three *professional roles* of (1) observer, (2) conversation partner and (3) content knowledge expert. These roles correspond with three interrelated pedagogical / didactical *competences*, that have consequently been described in the RE Handbook *Verwonderen & Ontdekken*. We refer here to professional qualities of: (1) observation, (2) interpretation, and (3) developmental guidance of children.[18]

**Provisional framework: interactional aspects**

The above-mentioned pedagogical principles and procedures require a further elaboration of the interactional aspects of the child theological learning environment. This led to a provisional schematic survey in which the professional roles of the teacher and the learning activities of the pupils can be seen at a glance. The scheme also contains recognizable references to the (adapted) basic model of *Elementarization.* From experience we know that the survey of the triad does not only function as visual framework for preparation of educational activities, but also as a catalyst for the

design of child theological learning environments. In addition, the framework works as well as an eye-opener for general introductions in Child theological acting.[19]

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[17] Schweitzer, 2003.
[18] V&O, pp. 50-53.
[19] cf. Schweitzer, 2006.

## CHILDREN'S THEOLOGY - INTERACTIONAL ASPECTS OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

| Characteristics Of the threefold interactional practice | Theologizing *of* children | Theologizing *with* children | Theologizing *for* children |
|---|---|---|---|
| Complementary professional roles of the *teacher* in the learning environment  | The teacher's professional role is that of an attentive observer who constantly interprets the various verbal and non-verbal utterances of the children and takes these into account in the design of the learning environment. The extent of prior knowledge and the nature of personal pre-concepts and intuitions are essential points of attention for the interpretation of the mental processes of the children. | The teacher's professional role is that of a stimulating conversation partner who offers the children an open structure within the context of the learning environment and continues to communicate with them on an equal basis. The teacher has prepared the educational learning process by means of the tool box of the Elementarization model and develops the required incentives / flywheels that contribute to the intrinsic motivation | The teacher's professional role is that of a guiding content knowledge expert who offers 'just- in-time' relevant orientations with respect to essential contents ('scaffolding') and focuses on mutual relations between *(1) the horizon of the children's current existence as they experience it,* and *(2) the horizon of the Holy Scriptures and religious traditions.* Preferably from the narrative perspective of |

| | | and to developmentally oriented conversations. | elementary stories. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Complementary educational activities of *the pupils* in the learning environment  | The carefully designed learning environment does justice to the children's philosophical as well as their theological questions. They are given ample opportunity to express and raise their personal questions and diverse experiences, thoughts, points of view, opinions, (etc.) in a variety of ways with respect to the themes, questions and problems concerned. | The carefully designed learning environment stimulates the children to think about both *the world of the past* and *the world of the present*. The children exchange questions, experiences, thoughts, points of view, opinions (etc.) among themselves, and at a later stage with their teacher. By definition everyone participates in the conversations in a symmetrical style and manner as an equal partner. | The carefully designed learning environment contains explicit domain specific frames of reference and an elementary collection of relevant basic knowledge. The arrangement of the learning environment offers the pupils a structured and coherent collection of varied and meaningful possibilities to deepen and enrich their learning processes and to discover new inspiring opinions and existential views. |

## *1.3. Domain-specific considerations*

**In conclusion**

Whilst initially contemplating the quintessential question of Child theological learning environments, I became inspired by Rainer Oberthür's good practices and as well by his reference frameworks Schweitzer et al., 1995). Subsequently I based my line of thought on educational concerns[20] and the conceptual approaches of Freudenberger-Lötz[21] and the perspectives of the V&O-Elementarization model.[22] This model provides a useful toolbox to design and realize processes of learning and teaching and congruent powerful learning environments.

Developments go on. By way of information six domain-specific considerations that currently guide the progression are described below, for you to freely reflect upon. Your comments are very welcome.

### *1 Generic pedagogical principle*

General point of departure in designing Child theological learning environments is the religious pedagogical intention to: (1) accept the development of children in the broad domains of religion, spirituality and outlook on life as a challenge, and consequently (2) to do justice in an integral and constructive style and manner to the meaning of their personal observations, experiences, imaginations, opinions and way of thinking.

### *2 Horizons of meaning*

Child theological learning environments have in common that they emphasize doing justice to the (pre-)concepts and theological perceptions, e.g.: *the horizons of meaning,* perceived by children. Children are not considered as passive recipients or *objects,* but as

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[20] Schweitzer, 2000.
[21] Freudenberger-Lötz, 2004, 2007.
[22] Valstar, 2007; Valstar & Kuindersma, 2008.

*subjects* and active participants in learning processes of a spiritual and religious nature and outlook on life, in interaction with their cultural environment (Vygotsky). Every child brings with them a developing belief system and an own theology.

## 3 Literacy

Only when children learn to engage in informed conversation about their beliefs, and the beliefs of others, can authentic religious literacy emerge.

Theologizing with children does not take place in the philosophical framework of *the free haven*, but within the regular and more encompassing context of *the learning environment* as

relatively open educational arrangements that invite children to investigate together minor and major questions, including important issues of life.[23] Child theological learning environments are not a Utopian scheme. Hermeneutical educational arrangements developed earlier exemplarily indicate what we may term *theological quality* and *child theological literacy*. Inspiring examples of this are found in the work of Rainer Oberthür.

## 4 Dialogues

Within the carefully designed learning environment, the core of child theological actions are interactive dialogues. They stand as such in one way or another in a previously determined structure. The fact remains, however, that certain situations outside the educational context may arise, in which children all of a sudden are fascinated by burning (life) questions and raise them spontaneously. Events like these present as well an opportunity for a theological conversation. This holds even more in case the children have already been acquainted with theological types of discourse earlier on. Interactive

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[23] Schweitzer, 2000.

dialogues may occur in any phase of the educational arrangement, depending on the course and dynamics of the learning process. This point is characteristic of the open nature of the Child theological learning environment.

### 5 Open design

Educational learning processes in which pupils actively participate, presuppose an educational design that anticipates possible interactions in a realistic way. Note: not of the 'average pupil', but of these *unique pupils in this specific group*. The ultimate course of the learning process in reality remains by definition dependent on variables that may change.

By means of the domain-specific Elementarization toolbox these variables can be mapped in the design of the learning environment. Child theological learning environments offer pupils structure, relevant content, various media and incentives, working methods and–*open space* for engagement, exploration, contextualization and reflection, which may contribute to their personal development.

### 6 Hermeneutical pattern

Novices and teachers to be in elementary education, experience in their educational designs that Child theological learning environments may result in a wide and variegated spectrum of learning activities, depending on the thematic content and the target age group of the pupils. In many cases practice shows an underlying *cyclic basic pattern*. This concerns: (a) the exploration and deepening of authentic questions of life; (b) the disclosure of hidden perspectives and insights from the religious traditions; (c) the discovery of new and challenging views on reality as perceived by children; and (d) the possible transfer to new ways of being and ways of acting in the contextual reality of one's personal existence.

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Evert Jonker

# 2. Children in Interaction with Learning Environments.

# Meta-Reflections on Religious Education

## *2.1. Introduction*

The scope of this article, on the subject of reflecting on the relations between learning environment (LE) and Religious Education (RE), requires some restrictions. Environment is a metaphor that refers to the surroundings and conditions in which a person lives or operates. Someone who is learning is surrounded by the space of the classroom, by teachers, fellow learners, methods and materials. This metaphor seems to assume that the learner is the centre of a universe. This explanation may be an exaggerated one, not only that, I also regard a learner and a LE as dynamic, interactive realities. However, in this article I take the perspective of the learning subject and I try to analyze what a learner does in relation to learning environments. I am aware that this approach is too narrow, but thinking about a powerful learning landscape presupposes some insights into what a subject is supposed to be able to learn and do.

For the sake of convenience, I do not only restrict myself to the learning subject, but also to children under the age of ten. I assume that adults and children not only participate in a personal, external and internal learning process within a powerful environment of good working methods, a beautifully arranged classroom, a nice, creative teacher, interesting books and so on, but also that children and adults simultaneously belong to the learning landscape in the perspective of each other as learner. Furthermore, mindful of the difference between formal learning (within an intended and powerful LE) and informal learning, I will also reflect on informal learning, learning as you go along, learning without effort, in which learners can

transform almost everything into a stimulating LE. So, I distinguish between formal and informal learning at school, informal learning at home and semi-formal learning in church education, situations which I intend to consider in this article.

## 2.2. Space, time, transcendence

I would like to emphasize that in the life span of a human being each moment can be seen as a state of learning with ups and downs. The time factor is an indispensable aspect of life and of intended and non-intended learning processes. Human beings are in a process, which is not the same as being in progress. Life is like a journey. As a metaphor the word journey connects space and time. As a term a LE sounds like an everlasting space, but environments change and even a classroom is a changing space. Sometimes, in life as a learning journey (whether or not under guidance) human beings experience the need to venture forth, sometimes the need to conform. Moreover, learning is a way of transcending the Self, transcending the circumstances, and also – more or less in a religious way – transcending the boundaries of actual space and time. Learning also implies transcending the present time by remembering the past and feeling trust in and envisaging hope for a future, not yet realised, and shared space. One could say that time, space and transcendence are the foundations of everyday's life, interpreted in a religious sense or otherwise. We all live on a time-line: when am I? is the question which helps us search  for our personal diachronic identity. We live on a space-line: where am I? This question encourages us to search for a synchronic identity. And we all live on a transcendence-line: what's my destiny? What's my vocation in life? These questions might be open to religious interpretations and to a so- called religious identity, but not necessarily so.

In my opinion, you need to take a leap into a religious language game, the gift of a new perspective. Examples of religious behaviour, stories,

reflections, rituals can stimulate human beings on their way to embracing a tradition of faith. As a Christian theologian in learning processes in and by the church and in theology, I try to proceed to Godtalk, encountered in stories, rituals and beliefs, and into the esthetical, ethical and religious dimensions of life. But only if learners construct life experiences in terms of time, space and transcendence, and only if they show a need for religion or are invited to build an LE, open to religion.[24]

## 2.3. Pilgrimage: challenges to the LE

(1) Going back to the metaphor of journey for life span or, in a more restricted sense, for an intended learning situation, we have to consider that the journey, understood as a quest, seems to come closer to the experiences of men than to those of women. As a metaphor a quest implies aspects such as leaving home and facing trials and tribulations, and suffering losses, even battles. Thus, a journey is more about separation and is different in the sense of connection and relationality. Maybe, instead of the term journey it is better to choose the term pilgrimage, because – as Osmer formulates – this metaphor 'better holds together the need of women and men both to leave the familiar, take risks, explore new inner and outer geographies and find a lasting center, build a home in which to dwell, sustain lasting relationships, and find continuity in their lives over time'.[25] Pilgrimage is a religious laden metaphor; it seems as if already a leap has been taken into a religious language game. This metaphor both refers to and has the intention to transform the situation of women and men on their common existential journey. Pilgrimage could be interpreted in terms of a secular destination, but also as a spiritual journey going to a holy place or to a place where God lives with human beings, a lasting, peaceful ambience such as the green pastures, where Jesus sat and ate with his

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[24] Van Knippenberg, Tjeu (2005*), Existentiële Zielzorg*, Zoetermeer, 128; cf Van Knippenberg, Tjeu (2002), Towards Religious Identity. *An Exercise in Spiritual Guidance*, Leiden.
[25] Osmer, Richard Robert (2006), *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations*, Louisville, 174.

fellow-travellers was sitting and eating. (Mark 6:39) This metaphor is able to evoke spirituality and, as Osmer says, 'new inner and outer geographies'. Acting in terms of a pilgrimage presents challenges to open a LE for inner and outer life experiences on the one hand, and on the other hand, to religious language, sources, beliefs and practices.

(2) Children under the age of ten can be regarded as 'pilgrims in time'[26], on the move from here and now towards a new phase of growth and developed intelligences (thinking, symbolizing, being in relations, etc.), on the move towards a new tomorrow, but they are located in the here and now. Children are able to experience happiness and joy now, directly, in playing and singing, even when they live in bad circumstances. They do not wait for happiness and joy to come tomorrow. Therefore, a beautiful and powerful LE is indispensable for opening up their presence towards transcendence; a reality beyond. Let the LE be like an oasis, also referring to non-religious and religious transcendence.[27]

(3) Christian belief articulates these basic tenets in narratives, symbols, rituals and institutions. We are as pilgrims of all ages, children, adolescents and adults. And who is the one, a travelling companion that has more trust than I have, more experience, more discernment, more maturity than I have received? A child? An adult? A teacher? Their support will help me (us) in being together on our way, oriented towards ultimate concerns. Especially in this area of concerns we are never too old or too young to learn. Maybe, as a child I was a more spontaneous and trustful believer than I am now and sometimes I remember that period and in that memory I feel some comfort and sustenance for today's understanding and coping with the realities and situations of my life. The child in me is still there. I always hope to learn

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[26] Cf Groome, Thomas (1999, 2e print*), Christian Religious Education. Sharing our Story and Vision*, San Francisco 1999, 12-15; Groome's ideas about pilgrimage and liberation accentuate the factor time.

[27] 'Godly Play' uses beautiful boxes and materials with the aim to illustrate that biblical stories acquire peace, communication and a sacred place. Truth, beauty and goodness go together. See: www.godlyplay.org/.

something from other people, old or young about the ultimate concern. Mutuality is a necessary condition for a LE.

(4) Indeed, we live our lives between two mysteries, the mystery of a beginning of ourselves and of the world (creation) and the mystery of a destiny in our time and place, and beyond our time and place. And in our presence and place we find ourselves caught between weal and woe, between freedom and evil, peace and chaos. As adults and as children, we all, whether believers in God or not, have to learn, again and again (1) to wonder about the gifts of life, (2) to be perplexed in the name of justice about evil and tragedy, (3) nevertheless to feel obliged and act with responsibility for sjaloom, and (4) to expect and hope: it could be otherwise, although we have to wait and have to be patient that things will change, maybe not during our own life time. The LE should invite participants to wonder, to be perplexed, to be responsible and to hope.

## 2.4. Ability to create an LE

In his classic work on Faith Development Fowler narrates how his – fifteen month old - daughter conducted daily a 'curious ritual' for several weeks.[28] Each morning she enters her parents' bedroom and observes that her parents are awake. And if they pay attention to her, she starts to name about eleven items in her bedroom. She names various pictures and objects of furniture, as far as her tentative language proficiency allows it. After naming each item she waits to get confirmation and praise from her parents. After that her day can begin.

What is happening here? The little girl has transformed her bedroom into a learning situation. This offers an important insight: children are able to interpret and turn their world into a LE.[29] Moreover, in Fowler's story the

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[28] Fowler, James W. (1981), *Stages of Faith. The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, San Francisco, 122f.
[29] See the movie 'Être et Avoir' and analyse the part of the learners in the design of the LE.

relationship between the learning subject (person) and the learning landscape (world) is a mutual one. And last but not least, important others (such as parents) are also part of her learning process and in that sense part of the LE. The parents are praising her item-naming and have confirmed that they understand what she is doing. Learning to speak is of vital interest to each new child. The fact that the little girl uses new tools of speech is a sensory-motor wonder. She has to remember the right names for the right things. She has to imitate the right sounds of the words, and to check that the symbols (names) fit reality. From the perspective of learning it is necessary that confirming people belong to her LE.

Taking this further, according to Fowler his daughter shows possibilities of 'intuitive-projective faith'. In naming aspects of her reality, she takes hold of a new way to experience and reflect upon her world. She shows a 'revolutionary' convergence of thought and language, and also a new relationship with her world as a possible LE. Yes, but as a parent Fowler gives also a surprising interpretation of what happened for several weeks during those mornings, when his daughter opened the door of the bedroom. He uses religious language to describe this situation of pure humanity:

'Minimally, I believe, it represented a daily celebration (and reconfirmation) that the external world was made up of dependably permanent objects, that they had names, and that she in mastering their names, could daily reconstitute a repertoire of shared meanings with her parents.' (123)

This use of terms with religious connotations (ritual, (re)confirmation, praise, believe, celebration) catches sight of the mysterious side of language acquisition, which he describes in the language game of religion. As if the discovery of her almost magical experience to represent reality in words needs a rite, a song-like repetition, as if she expresses a morning prayer, which sustains her and her parents to start the day and to have faith in the world.

## *2.5. Learning*

What happens with Fowler's daughter makes clear what learning could be. (1) A broad definition of learning highlights some important aspects:

> 'Learning is the process through which we become the human beings we are, the process by which we internalize the external world and through which we construct our experiences of that world'.[30]

The little girl has internalized something of the world. She makes clear that language helps us to become a human being in relation to others and this counts as a possibility to construct the outer world, to which a LE refers. (2) Her early morning words illustrate that a LE can be defined as interplay, in space and time, between measures, materials and ways of coaching, facilitating learning activities. For example: the design of a classroom (which gives homelike feelings), the daily life, virtual spaces in a digital world, the body, the teacher, a lesson as a guided journey, other children, all are part of the LE. In this example the girl calls up confirmation from trusted others, her parents. She shows us what the LE should do. (3) Jarvis' definition of learning touches on a communal aspect ("we"). According to the definition both the learner and the external world are part of and mediator in the relation with the external world, even when an intended LE is an abstraction and limitation of the outer world. We emphasize that the LE (measures, materials, space) can be viewed as a go-between of learners (children and adults) and the external world.

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[30] Jarvis, Peter/Holford, John/Griffin, Colin (1998), *The Theory and Practice of Learning*, London, VII.

## *2.6. A leap into religious sensibility*

In RE, learners and teachers together have to work out a sensibility for ultimate concerns, the opening of minds into a reality beyond, opening our hearts to a reality of ultimate love and freedom, justice and mercy. We have to learn awe and stillness as concepts where movement, dance and music, poetry and reflection are made possible.[31] It's the heart of the matter of children's giving and receiving meaning. I'm reflecting now in terms of spirituality, an inner sense. Spirituality is a fuzzy concept. It regards the total person (cognitive, affective, and practical) responding with all senses to the possibilities and boundaries of life.[32] It implies going behind the fore-ground of existence and reaching down to that curious sense of the universe. Maybe, it has to do with the Sacred, although in modern times sacred is a fuzzy concept as well, understood as the numinous with its fascinating and frightening effects on human beings (Rudolph Otto). However, for this case, I prefer a pragmatic description of spirituality: a personal and communal, durable, lively, transcendent orientation towards an existentially basic centre of power and value. This orientation might be full of Christian, Muslim, or secular narratives and practices.

The LE exists in connection with the inner self of each learner and teacher, and consists not only of measures and materials. For each individual, learners and teachers belong to the LE. The LE reflects and mediates 'something' of the outer world. The ultimate concern has interrelations with the outer world. The content of both a learning process and the LE are like learners and teachers involved in a shared centre of power and value, which

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[31] By empirical research Hay is convinced that prominent aspects of childhood points to spiritual experiences, connected with Awareness of the Here-and-Now, Awarenes of Mystery, and Awareness of Value (Hay, David (2007), *Something There. The Biology of Human Spirit*, London, 130ff.; cf. Hay, D. & Nye, R. (2006, revised edition), The Spirit of the Child, London.

[32] By spiritual experience Tacey means not something 'added on', something metaphysical, but 'a deeper and more profound apprehension of our life'. (Tacey, David (2004), *The Spirituality Revolution. The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality*, London-New York, 78). In my opinion the apprehension might be influenced and framed by religious narratives and rituals.

take part in the ultimate mystery of life, which in religious language could be interpreted as the Kingdom of God. The figure shows aspects of a LE.

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                                                              God ('s Kingdom
                   Shared centre                              /
                   of power and value    <---->     The Ultimate
                      /              \                         \
                     /       |        \               Outer world
                    /       LE          \
                   /       /  \            \
                  /                          \
            Learners <------->Teachers
                  \            /
                  Learner/Self
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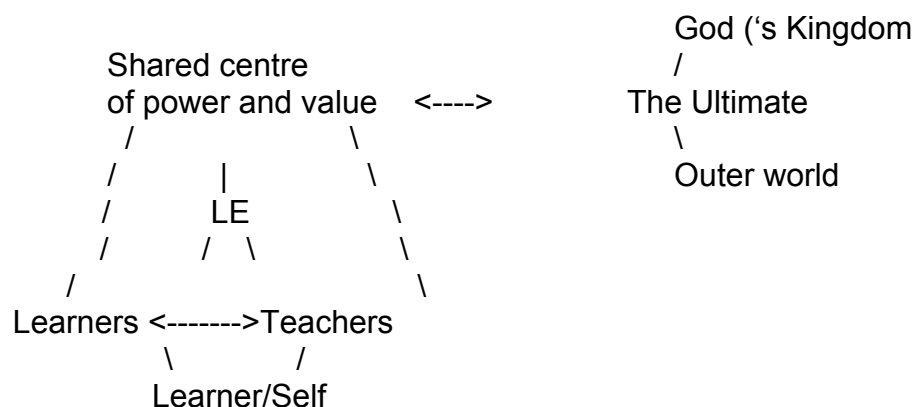
The LE of RE should be at least (but not only) an incentive for spirituality. At home, in the church (class)room, but also at school a special focus point, for instance, a table of celebration and contemplation with candles, a text, artwork, audio equipment for religious music, could be a sustainable environment for learning, sharing and reflecting spirituality. The classroom arranged in this manner has a powerful function in bridging the outer world, bridging the internal world of everyone in the LE and bridging the ultimate. In classrooms in Germany I have seen religious focal points, sometimes as a carpet on the floor with symbols, artefacts, and a twig. Of course, a classroom is not a chapel, but sometimes it is desirable that children experience their spiritual inner life in a contemplative environment, and also reflect with each other on that kind of experiences.[33] In the church room for the children's service on Sunday you could always find a burning Amnesty candle, a new picture each month, for example, of the sower and a great yellow sun (Van Gogh). These arrangements invite reflections, longings, perhaps prayers, stories, or rituals.

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[33] Halbfas, Hubertus (1989, 4e Auflage), *Religionsunterricht in der Grundschule*. Lehrerhandbuch 1, Düsseldorf, 30-40 ('Lernen als räumliche Erfahrung'); Hilger, Georg, Leimgruber, Stephan, Ziebertz, Hans Georg (2003, 2e Auflage), *Religionsdidaktik. Ein Leitfaden für Studium, Ausbildung und Beruf*, Stuttgart, 234-248 ('Wo wird gelernt? Schulische und ausserschulische Lernräume').

## *2.7. Interrelations between learner and LE*

According to the action psychological theory of Vygotsky the basis of mental actions can be found in the external world.[34] A social process transforms actions in the world into inner, mental actions. Transformation occurs spontaneously, but it can happen in an intentional dialogue with teachers. So, we can distinguish between a path from outside actions to inside mental actions and secondly, a path from inside mental actions to outside actions. To Vygotsky necessary conditions for learning and developing mental actions are: dialogue, internalization, the zone of nearest development, the role of adults, and the social-communicative origin of mental actions, basic aspects of the LE. A shortcoming of this theory seems to be that the mental actions are restricted to processes of thinking. (1) They are not only thinking actions, but also emotional and intra and interpersonal actions. (2) Learners integrate the previous zone, they not only leave that zone behind, e.g. - in terms of Fowler - the intuitive projective faithing and imaging is integrated into the next zone of the mythic-literal faithing and imaging.

The object-relation theory of Winnicott might be helpful in understanding - from the perspective of the learner - the interrelation between the subject and the LE. For a subject an object is something or someone in the external world. Mostly, an object is represented in the internal world of the subject as an image, as an idea. Every object is made (person, thing) in the intra-psychic world (self) of the subject and every object is also found in the external world. So self and other, inner and outer world, psychic and external reality are intertwined in transitional experiences. Fresh knowledge emerges from the interaction between the self and the world. Learners interpret and give meaning to information from the object world, which is related to the subject's world of experience. Imagination and relatedness of the learners are presupposed when learners participate in and interpret transitional spaces such as the LE, in which they relate their inner

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[34] Vygotsky, L.S. (1978), *Mind in Society*, Cambridge.

experiences to what they encounter. As interpretative producers, children will internalize the LE, but as part of the LE they also can create new forms and a fresh, not seldom surprising use emerges.[35]

Two examples, borrowed from classic works, of mental activities in interrelation with a dialogical LE.

(1) Many years ago John Hull reported some small talk[36]:

> Child (5¾): I've got four invisible friends.
>
> Parent:      Who are they?
>
> Child:       Well, there's Mary, Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit.
>
> Parent:      (laughing) Who told you that?
>
> Child:       My heart told me that (pause) my brain told me that. (laughs) Does my brain talk to me? Does it say hello? (child's name)

This child is able to reflect on inner activities. Maybe, the formulation 'invisible friends' is inherited (from a LE) and the memory provides a link. The expectation of the child that the adult loves to talk is important and that the adult will react in a respectful and stimulating way. The child will take also something home from a listening LE, saying: 'I will do it at home; my father is a real good listener and debater'.

(2) A subtle statement by Fowler is helpful to underline that children require pictures in their LE, so that it is easier for them to create inner images and stories. They also want mutual reflections on what they know and see outside in interaction with their inner self[37]:

> 'An image begins as a vague, felt inner representation of some state of affairs and of our feelings about it... an image does not wait or depend upon conscious processes....The image unites "information"

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[35] Winnicott, D.W. (2005/1971), Playing and Reality, London and New York; Schaap-Jonker, Hanneke (2008), Before the Face of God. An Interdisciplinary Study of the Meaning of the Sermon and the Hearer's God image, Personality and Active State, Berlin LIT, 21-67 ('David W. Winnicott's theory on transitional experience and object use').

[36] Hull, John M. (1991), God-talk with Young Children. Notes for Parents and Teachers, Philadelphia, 26.

[37] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 26.

and feeling; it holds together orientation and affectional significance. As such images are prior to and deeper than concepts... When we are asked what we think or know about something or someone, we call up our images, setting in motion a kind of scanning interrogation or questioning of them. Then in a process that involves both a forming and an expression, we narrate what our images "know". The narration may take story form; it may take poetic or symbolic form, transforming nascent inner images into articulated shared images; or it may take the propositional form of conceptual abstractions'.

Put simply, learners of all ages normally have inner representations (images) at their disposal, which should be switched on in the LE. From the very beginning babies and small children develop structural tools, important in the relation with the outer world, for understanding and survival. Those instruments are summarized as imagination, memory, language and evaluation.

## 2.8. Multiple intelligences

Howard Gardner researched the influence of Piaget's theory of cognitive development in assessments of children.[38] Piaget believes no longer that young children are just miniature or ignorant adults. Children have their own characteristics of representing the world. A young schoolchild is able to deal with concepts such as time and quantity, if the child meets these in concrete mental operations. Gardner examines a problem: is it enough for education to present content and ideas in ways that are developmentally appropriate? Is Piaget's fascination for cognition shortcoming related to fully

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[38] Gardner, Howard (1993), *Multiple Intelligences. The Theory in Practice. A Reader*, New York, 13-35; Silver, Harvey F/Strong, Richard/Perini, Matthew J (2000), So Each May Learn. Integrating, Learning Styles and Multiple Intelligences, Trenton).  To Gardner the goals of human education are: enhance understanding and enhance the nature of truth, beauty and goodness (Gardner, Howard (2000), *The Disciplined Mind. Beyond Facts and Standarized Tests, the K-12 Education that Every Child Deserves*, Harmondsworth, 115-138).

understanding the differences between children and the multiple ways mental representations are recognized in the external world, representations such as art, drawing and so on? Gardner has developed eight disciplines or capacities for everyone, although there are human beings with excellent capacities (e.g. Shakespeare in language, Einstein in mathematics, Mozart in music). Gardner also has tried to look for an existential capacity, but the result of that research was: maybe it is a half capacity: existential intelligence needs all the other ones and seems to integrate them.  He was also unable to find moral and spiritual capacities. The intelligences are not fixed categories.

•*Verbal-linguistic* intelligence: manipulating words for a variety of purposes: debate, persuasion, storytelling, poetry, prose, writing, instruction.

•*Logical-mathematic*: using rationality, finding patterns, establishing cause-and-effect relationships, thinking in concepts, putting ideas to tests.

•*Spatial*: capacity for perceiving, creating, and recreating pictures and images, perceptive of slight details, ability to convert words or impressions into mental images, keen sense of spaces, location and direction.

•*Bodily-Kinaesthetic*: relating to physical self, manipulating one's body, moving and acting things out, enjoying physical challenges.

•*Musical*: ability to produce melody and rhythm, including understanding of, appreciation, and forming opinions about music.

•*Interpersonal*: working well with other people, sensitive to slight variations in people's moods, attitudes, and desires. Most people with this intelligence know how to identify with, and respond to the temperament of others.

•*Intrapersonal*: ability to gain access to one's own feelings and emotional state. Ability to form realistic goals and conceptions of themselves (self-understanding).

•*Naturalist*: attuning to the natural world of plants and animals, natural geography, natural objects such as rocks, clouds and stars, love to be outdoors, deep understanding of the environment.

Generally, everyone possesses all these capacities. Most people demonstrate a higher ability in one or two intelligences. A LE has to activate all intelligences for being and becoming a human being. For instance: each space of intended learning should have some aspects of nature in the classroom, a place to retire and be silent, pleasant places for personal communication, music instruments, space for dance, moving and sport, works of arts, photographs, maps, puzzles, mathematic figures and instruments, books, poems on the wall, famous quotes and so on. Materials made, or chosen by learners are also present. And the didactic methods applied to the guided journey along the subjects in the learning programs stimulate all the capacities in a balanced manner.

Religious Education incorporates all the intelligences and is in cognitive, affective and practical ways not only aimed at obtaining and evaluating knowledge about religion, the Bible, faith tradition, sacred places and rituals, but it is also aimed at values and learning to internalize gratitude, to experience life as a gift, to discover sensibility for sin, guilt, reconciliation, death, suffering, renewal, new life, unanswered questions, and ultimate reality. Therefore we have to enlist art (spatial capacity), singing (musical capacity), plants, sand, mould (natural capacity), dance (bodily kinaesthetic capacity), soul searching (intrapersonal capacity), social learning (interpersonal capacity), and so on.

An example. Four verbally, logically and spatially intelligent children create their own LE. They design a 'Sykimosch' (Synagogue, Church, Mosque), a place of peace, religion and worship.[39] Not only adults, but children also facilitate and create their own LE. They start the debate about the presence

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[39] Hoegen-Rohls, Christine (2005), '"Sykimosch". Fünftklässler diskutieren über einen Frömmigkeitsraum aus Synagoge, Kirche und Moschee' in: Bucher, Anton, Büttner, Gerhard/Freudenberger-Lötz, Petra/Schreiner, Martin, "Kirchen sind ziemlich christlich". Erlebnisse und Deutungen von Kindern. Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie, Band 4, Stuttgart, 39-53.

of God in this original sacred building. It is their transitional object. They display an understanding that the building can have the character of a LE for believers. The aim of that environment is to prevent war, to develop mutual respect for the religion of others (in a gallery of images), and to celebrate the own tradition.

## 2.9. A child doing theology

A presupposition of RE at home and in the church is that naming 'God' is an evocative act, and the LE should invite to this performance. The word 'God' refers to a dynamic atmosphere of ultimate love, freedom and justice. At the same time, the word also refers to an inner longing for God as the faithful Other. Researchers such as Fowler and his interviewers want to know more about the process of faithing of people, children included. The discourses with children resemble engaging in theology with children.[40]

| | |
|---|---|
| Interviewer: | What does God look like? |
| Millie (10): | Well, I don't know. But do you want me to tell you what I imagine that he looks like? I imagine that he's an old man with a white beard and with hair wearing a long robe and that the clouds are his floor and he has a throne. And he has all these people and there's angels around him. And there's all the good people, angles and – and um, cupids and that he has like – I guess I – he has a nice face, nice blue eyes. He can't be all white, you know, he has to- he has blue eyes and he's forgiving. And I guess that's the way I think he is. |
| Interviewer: | How do you get to be a good person? |
| Millie: | To believe in God and try your hardest to do what is good. |

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[40] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 138f.

| | |
|---|---|
| Interviewer: | When we do something wrong, does God know? |
| Millie: | Yeah. God's with you all the time. |
| Interviewer: | He is? How is that? |
| Millie: | Well, God's inside of you in a way. In a way God's inside of you but in a way God isn't. He's inside of you because you believe – if you believe in Him then he's inside of you, but he's also around. |
| Interviewer: | How can he be all around? |
| Millie: | Well, that's a good question. Um, well he's – he lives on top of the world, so in a way he's all around. |

The images are traditional and presumably inherited from a LE (pictures in a children's Bible, the way someone has talked about God, etc.). The insight into the presence of God within the Self is new (intrapersonal capacity). Self- evaluation of and insight into their own learning process can be furthered. Millie constructs a narrative of her own mental images and finds language and some ideas about a big theological question (God's transcendence and God's immanence). This child does not question the image of the old man as a symbol for ultimate vision, clear wisdom and forgiveness. In an intentional LE teachers can ask more about the image of God, I presume, and maybe the child will arrive at the insight that God is a figure in a story, but also a mental image in the mind. As Hull reports a dialogue: "God is a bit like lots of things, but he's not exactly like anything. Because God is unique. God hasn't really got a shape at all. ...... God is a bit like a very big idea".[41] Often tensions (conflicts) are felt between the one LE and other learning environments in which children operate. The religious LE should be always an inviting one to cautiously search for the ultimate: the truth, beauty and goodness of God.

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[41] Hull, *God-talk*, 28.

## 2.10. In summary

(1) Children shape and are part of their LE. They have capacities and will use their tools of imagination, memory, language and evaluation. To them a fruitful LE is a multiple powerful learning situation, in which different intelligences are switched on.

(2) A LE should be a representation of the external world, with references to expressions of inner mental processes and to the ultimate. Spirituality of children concerns awareness, awe, inquisitiveness, and sensibility for something more and beyond. The transitional space in which the LE, the educator and the children participate, evokes internal and external images.

(3) The same things for children also apply to teachers in RE. But they have a special responsibility to open up the narrative identity of children to the mystery of life, and the power of ultimate love, freedom, justice and mercy, whether they act and perform at school within a Christian tradition or not. In Christian Religious Education learners can speak openly about God and discuss inner images of God. Naming God does not imply indoctrination. Children may name God, without any reservation. Let the LE be frank and open, like the bell-ringing and praying minister during a visit of learners to the church, as if she is saying: 'this is my job, and this is what we do in this building. We long for ultimate Love'.[42]

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[42] Billet, Frank/ Schmetzer, Wofgang (2005), '"Wo ist denn hier nur der Hochsitz?" Kinder erkunden den Kircheraum', in: Bucher, Anton, u.A., "*Kirchen sind ziemlich christlich*", 149-154, 151.

Brian Gates

# 3. Crucial Moments: Religious Development

# across the Life Span

The title probably makes what I'm going to try to say to you more grand than it actually is. Maybe if I were making a presentation in two or more years' time it would have more substance.

I'm hesitant because my own lifespan research is still at the data gathering stage. I'll explain that shortly, but I'm also the more hesitant because of the complexities involved:

1. Research in developmental psychology. …Maybe the interplay of conscious and unconscious dimensions of learning long known (Freudian 'muck and money') but the subtleties and complexities involved continue to amaze me.

2. Speed of technological change in the learning environment – not just TV and internet, but also the mobile phone. Social networking and instant messaging.

## *3.1. Some preliminary assumptions*

WHERE am I coming from? I speak as..
- a Christian, ordained as such by baptism and confirmation in the Anglican/Episcopalian tradition
- a public educator, whose entire academic and professional life has been engaged with religion and ethics and with enabling students in schools and universities to better understand them

- chair of the Religious Education Council which is committed to maintaining and deepening that understanding collaboratively internally and externally across national faith community organisations www.recouncil.org.uk + www.celebratingre.org

*As a Christian*, I hope that others, indeed the whole world, will come to recognise the gospel as true and be transformed accordingly. I recognise that that can only happen if the faith inherited from previous generations is effectively translated, interpreted and lived so that its meaning is intelligible and compellingly relevant in a world that continues to evolve. Recycling of verbal formulae, however accurately done, will not in itself suffice if the language has lost its resonance. The history of civilisation is full of 'dead gods'. Their theological resuscitation is often possible, but not universally desirable.

*As a public educator*, I hope that others, indeed the whole world, will learn to understand the range and depth of religious belief, behaviour and belonging and to become discerning of its relevance for their understanding of themselves and others. By the time they leave school, every child has the right to become not only numerate and literate, but also religiate. This is fundamental to their personal and social development, a powerful enrichment to the peculiar formula of beliefs and values which they individually take forward across their lifespan as natural theologians. Contemporary society is the more impoverished by the superficiality and prejudice which can thrive when this does not happen.

*As chair of the RE Council of England and Wales,* I hope that others, indeed the whole world will come to accept that the Religious Education agenda will only be fully activated through inclusive collaboration. It will be incomplete if some mainstream religions and beliefs are excluded, theistic or otherwise. The REC has in its membership of national organisations all the principal religious traditions of the UK (inc Baha'i, Jains and Zoroastrians) as well as the British Humanist Association. It would be incomplete if relevant

academic and professional organisations were not also in its membership. The REC therefore includes those of school teachers, advisers and inspectors, teacher trainers and university professors. The intellectual credibility of the subject is in doubt unless this condition of mutual engagement and challenge is systematically acknowledged. Unless it is content with talking only to itself, neither big 'T' nor small 't' T/theology can properly ignore plurality of claims to truth.

## 3.2. The scope of my life span religion research project

It has two dominant aspects. One concerns the **lateral extension of religion** across the whole span of a person's contemporary life. The other is concerned with the **longitudinal extension of religion** across a person's continuing life. Both are predicated on a definition of religion which is multi-dimensional – i.e. not tied to prescriptive content (e.g. belief in God) nor expressed primarily in one mode of human being. Religions tend to ramify across the whole of life rather than being reducible to a separate compartment. I like to think of them as 'our breathing skin', 'the distinctive fabric of our being human', 'the heart and mind of who we are' or even our 'living conscience'.

When I began the research forty years ago, I had come to the conclusion that the intellectual case for studying religions in public education had achieved academic respectability without need of any special pleading appeal for supernatural justification. What remained contentious was its continuing rootedness for all children and young people in a society which was becoming increasingly secular and multi-faith. I therefore set out to map the dimensions of religion which recur in the child's own core curriculum.

In doing this I was principally influenced by the approach of Ninian Smart who resisted the temptation to define religions according to any pre-

specified sets of beliefs. Instead, he identified a range of component modes or dimensions. They vary in content and degree of centrality from one religious tradition to another, but they are commonly recognisable across human civilisations. I illustrate this in the following chart:

### NINIAN SMART'S MODEL OF RELIGION

| Dimension | Defining Characteristics | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| **Theology** and **Philosophy** (propositional thinking) | Attempt to give clear, rational order to the faith so as to form coherent & consistent whole. | Christian doctrine of Trinity, Original Sin; creeds. Buddhist *dhamma* – Four Noble Truths and Conditional origination |
| **Myth & Narrative** (story-telling) | Stories of Gods/gods & invisible world, and of relation with human beings. History of salvation. | Genesis Creation & Fall stories; Exodus. Olympian gods of Iliad. Buddha's career. |
| **Ethics & Law** (social behaviour) | Consequences of faith for way of life. Codes defining how this is to be ordered. | Passion of Christ and *Imitatio Christi*, care of neighbour. Buddhist compassion. Muslim *jihad*. |
| **Ritual Action** (worship, prayer and dedication) | Outer behaviour coordinated with inner intention as expression of deeper meaning. | Christian sacraments, liturgy and private prayer. Meditation and yoga. Ablutions and pilgrimage. |
| **Experience & Intuition** (inner life) | Personal experience of God; sense of presence, or of other world. Revelation of Krishna to Arjuna in *Bhagavadgita*. | Buddha's enlightment. Visions of Biblical prophets. Inner awareness. |
| **Social & Institutional** (group life) | Communal organisation of believers. Social roots and effects of religion. | Christian Churches, Buddhist Sangha. Hindu varnashramadharma. Monastic strucutres. |

For exposition, see Smart 1968b pp 15-18; Smart 1969 Ch 1; Smart 1983 pp 1-11; Smart 1989 pp 9-25; and Smart 1996.

And since religions ramify across the whole of life there is a complementarity between the phenomenon of religion and the phenomenon of humanity.

## RELIGIOUS AND HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF BEING

| Dimension & Operational Mode | Defining Characteristics | Examples: Specifically Religious | Generally Human |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Theology** and **Philosophy** (propositonal thinking) | Attempt to give clear, rational order to the faith so as to form coherent & consistent whole. | Christian doctrine of Trinity, Original Sin; creeds. Buddhist *dhamma* – Four Noble Truths and Conditional origination. | Verbal articulation of personal world view or philosophy of life. Formal reasoning in maths, science + history. |
| **Myth & Narrative** (story-telling) | Stories of God/gods & invisible world, and of relation with humanity. History of salvation. | Genesis Creation & Fall stories; Exodus.<br><br>Olympian gods of Iliad.<br><br>Buddha's career. | TV soaps, posted messages; novels and biographies; sagas of family and national history and identity. |
| **Ethics & Law** (social behaviour) | Consequences of faith for way of life.<br><br>Codes defining how this is to be ordered. | Passion of Christ and *Imitatio Christi*, care of neighbour. Buddhist compassion. Muslim *jihad*. | Directioning from national and international legislation and constitutions. |
| **Ritual Action** (worship, prayer and dedication) | Outer behaviour coordinated with inner intention as expression of deeper meaning. | Christian sacraments, liturgy and private prayer. Meditation and yoga.<br><br>Ablutions and pilgrimage. | Habitual routines which shape daily life and self-presentation to others. |

| Experience & Intuition (inner life) | Personal experience of God; sense of presence, or of otherness, or of a beyond. | Buddha's enlightenment. Visions of Prophets. Revelation of Krishna to Arjuna in *Bhagavadgita*. | Inner awareness. Sense of otherness. Personal wondering and depth. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social & Institutional (group life) | Communal organisation of believers. Social root and effects of religion. | Christian Churches, Buddhist Sangha. Hindu varnashramadharma. Monastic structures. | Family, tribe and nation. School and college. Football/other sports club. Internet social networks. |

This is what I mean by the lateral extension of religion across the whole span of a person's contemporary life. I will illustrate what this encompasses by explaining the instruments which in the early 1970s I first used to gather data from boys and girls between the ages of 6-15 years.

I saw that in order to avoid compartmentalising religion, I would need to find ways of holding open the potential correlation of the ordinary language of life and death with explicitly religious aspects of such. At the same time I needed to be able to engage the interest of everyone participating, and to maintain their concentration during two full hours.

So, what of the means of obtaining reliable data? Though I decided to use a written exercise initially, to give a quantitative dimension to the investigation, I realised that individual interviews would be necessary if I was to gain qualitative access to the dynamic flow of pupils' thoughts and feelings. This would make it easier to check nuances and follow up points of particular interest and sensitivity.

Accordingly, the interviews were two-fold in form, one in writing and the other oral. The written one which took about an hour to complete comprised:

- written responses to two stories (*Where the Wild Things Are* and *The Blind Men and the Elephant*) – i.e. deliberately not Biblical ones

- two sentences for completion (`The most important things I would like to do in life are...' and 'What puzzles me most in life is...')

- an invitation to try to picture God and then to explain what had been drawn or declined

- a list of questions about age, family background and institutional religious involvement.

This was followed by an hour-long individual interview for a religiously denominated subset of those who had completed the written interview - some 340 of the 1500 who engaged in the written exercise. These representative sub-sets included boys and girls from the following backgrounds Church of England (80), Free Church Protestant (40) and Roman Catholic (40); Jews (40), Muslim(20) and Sikhs (40); Unattached - with no institutional religious belonging (80), Each of these oral interviews was tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. In a 'semi-clinical' fashion, there was a sequence of activities and questions which covered the following themes:

- games played on the way home from school

- examples of children's rituals including present giving, and of ritual in prayer and worship

- death, what happens when you die and any beliefs about life beyond it

- scientific concepts relating to thunder and lightning, space exploration and nuclear destruction

- social and political concepts relating to group, national and international citizenship, plus a role ranking exercise

- who is loved and why and

- what Father Christmas stands for, religious links and points of comparison

- a final focus on God.

Smart's dimensional analysis of religion was a useful means for checking that the ground on which I focused was as inclusive in its cover as it needed

to be. Just as he emphasised the logical coherence of the dimensions one with another, I would need to attend to children's grasp of this. And because of the potential for compartmentalising of the religious dimensions from personal life, I would keep deliberately in mind that religious and human dimensions are two sides of the same coin. This can be illustrated in this chart:

| Dimension | Religious Items | Secular Items |
|---|---|---|
| **Propositional reasoning** | Beyonds to death Petitionary prayer Truth claims in religions Blind men and Elephant | Thunder and lighting Nuclear bomb drop Space exploration Where Wild Things Are |
| **Myth and narrative form** | God picturing Fantasy associated with beyond to death Notion of divine | Father Christmas Fantasy in children's play or associated with thunder Role ranking |
| **Ethics and evaluation** | Punishment Relations between religions Liturgical celebrations | Range and criteria for loving Ambitions in life Crack stepping |
| **Ritual, play and gesture** | Naming and initiation Stances of praying Private prayer | Collar-holding Present giving Puzzlement |
| **Personal experience** | Grounds for belief or unbelief Awareness of God | Last wishes |
| **Social ordering** | Churches Religious leaders Alternative religious identities | Roles and their ranking Political belonging |

Items in the interviews corresponding to Smartian dimensional analysis of human experience – specifically religious and more generally 'secular'.

The main thrusts of the research findings are conveyed in a *Learning for Living* article (yesterday's BJRE) entitled 'Religion in the child's own core curriculum'. Here's a flavour:

**JUDITH** goes regularly to the synagogue with her family; she has heard of G-d since she was very small, so much so that she knows him 'by instinct'. Although she pictures G-d as 'fatherly, helping and loving', she says that he is more 'a sort of spirit' than 'a person': 'G-d is everywhere. He is sort of like a gas that develops everywhere'. Her trust in G-d is such that if she heard that the world was about to end, she would 'carry on as normal', believing that it would be because G-d had judged it should happen. She would still pray, however, as in an emergency when others were in great danger; G-d's plan for everyone, written at the start of each new year, might yet be changed, since G-d responds to care. Beyond death though, she has a real hope of a Messianic age, centred on Jerusalem, when everyone will be united under G-d, but she declines to prophesy when or how soon this is likely to happen.

At the outset, in the written interview, she specified that 'G-d and the supernatural' puzzled her most in life. This is confirmed by the way she is quite skeptical of 'calming' talk of heaven: it cannot really be called a place, 'it's mythological'. Indeed, if she starts trying to imagine beyond death, she senses there is risk of getting wrong ideas, even losing her faith. Superstition, like horoscopes, crossing fingers or talk of Father Christmas, she finds just 'funny'. In fact, touching wood is like saying 'please G-d, don't let this happen to me'. Such superstition she thinks will probably flourish 'among people from broken homes' - 'you wouldn't have much to hang on to' - but 'really you should have faith in G-d'.

To Judith the Jewish belief is the true and right one, and she thinks all other religions have stemmed from it. Nevertheless, she is reluctant to say it is actually better than the others: 'they are all true in the mind of the people who believe'. Thus earlier she had approved of what she took to be 'the moral' of the story of the Blind Men and the Elephant. G-d rules the world with kindness and not hatred and this means people 'get what they deserve'. Similarly, she seeks to love everybody - 'even when sometimes I

think they're hateful' - 'because you're living together and you have to get on together, you should love your neighbour'.

**ARNOLD** last went to church when he was in junior school. He thinks of churchgoing as for christenings and marriages, but also as sanctuary from capture. At Christmas he thinks that bread and wine is put out at the front; he is sure it stands for something, but does not know what. Holy water is important at christenings; it is taken from 'a lake or river' where Jesus is supposed to have had a bath, and therefore 'since Jesus has bathed in it, you can be part of him'.

Arnold appears to reject belief in God and any associated life after death. It is 'just a tale' that God is in heaven: 'I believe when Jesus came, when he died, someone just took him out of that cave where they carried him, and just had it as a tale'. He can picture God in human form as Jesus, crowned as 'everyone's father'; God was alive once, but he cannot think he could remain so today. Interestingly, he had cited the whereabouts of heaven - 'if there is one' - as the thing which he found most puzzling in life.

Yet some reverence remains for both the church and God. The vicar 'teaching the word of God' he ranks as third above policeman, teacher and MP. He might himself; in desperation at the loss of his pet fish, pray to God, though he knows this would be futile since he has seen his grandma (with whom he regularly stayed) praying for his granddad to live, although he had 'had to go'. Thus he might pray to God for a miracle, while not believing in him, just as he used to carry a little stone in his pocket for luck, or to cross his fingers to stop it raining when he was playing soccer. He certainly still wishes to call himself a Christian.

Of all the different religions, he knows that Christianity is right, because it says about God and Jesus in the Bible, but not about the 'idols or statues' worshipped by the 'Hindus and Arabs'; and Jews are people who sell you toys that break. Yet he is not too dogmatic: 'others might be right if they believe in it, but I don't think they are. I might think something that they don't think, like I don't believe in God and other Christians might'. While thinking

you should 'love everybody' 'because we're all one family' he is selective in both his class and on his street; he hits back at bullies. In the same way, while pointing to the applicability of the Blind Men and the Elephant story to the Northern Ireland situation, in the written interview he went on to list as the most important thing he would like to do during his life (as well as going to the moon and becoming a millionaire) as 'drop a bomb on Southern Ireland' - the army he told me later was being too soft with the IRA.

From all the written work and interviews, I was and am convinced that the strongest case for giving direct attention to religion in the curriculum of all public education is that its words and concerns feature both explicitly and implicitly in every pupil's search for meaning. As well as revealing some interesting characteristics about developmental patterns in children's thinking, it conveyed much about the process and content of believing. Its most substantial finding was its highlighting of the complex and interweaving nature of children's understanding of the world and religion's part in it – hence my choice of words in the title of: *Religion in the child's own core curriculum*.

So much for the **lateral extension of religion** across the whole span of a person's contemporary life. Now I come to what I mean by the **longitudinal extension of religion across a person's continuing life**. This has only more recently been begun. I'm trying to make contact with a third of those I originally interviewed some 40 years ago. I then invite them to re-do the written exercise and again go through the individual oral interview. I then share with them what they previously wrote and let them see and hear what they originally shared in my interview with them. Finally, I encourage them to reflect on how and why their own views of the world and religion within it have developed and changed.

Foolishly, I never planned to do this from the beginning and therefore I never built in any mechanism for keeping in contact. Thus, when several years ago I first began to think seriously that I might do this, I seriously underestimated the difficulties which I would have in contacting those I'd

interviewed nearly four decades passed. School records were incomplete and subject now to confidentiality control. Instead, I've had to rely on telephone directories, potential contacts in local faith communities, and websites such as *Friends Reunited*. Fortunately, contact with one individual has also led to others. Most have moved away from where they were at school, some have emigrated or even died. But even when I've located them, there's still the task of persuading them to set aside half a day to participate. The promise of copies of their original writing and a transcript + audio-recording of the interview is usually incentive enough, but not always. My target is to reach 100 of the 340 during the next two years. However informative, much fewer than that will weaken the value of any generalisations I subsequently make.

From the ten interviews so far completed the general points emerging are

- remarkable continuities with their childhood or adolescent frames of reference

- though beliefs have changed or been refined they have been deepened rather than narrowed, though some closed mindedness and superficiality persists amongst believers and 'unbelievers' alike

- their individual mode of reasoning in Piagetian terms has developed further but retains positively or negatively a similar degree of intelligent interest and curiosity

- coherence and consistency in overall beliefs remains a priority, as for instance between science and religion, social and political horizons in relation to religious ones

- the process of 'scavenging' or 'jigsawing' for meaning remains much in evidence as individual sources are invoked and drawn on from across the span of life – from both lateral and longitudinal experience

- adults, no less than children, deserve the mantle of being natural theologians

Here briefly are two examples:

Firstly, there is someone I'm calling **HARRY**, now living in Australia. He's been there with his family for 20 years and I caught him for an afternoon at Gatwick airport preparing to fly back after a brief visit to see his parents back in England. After I originally interviewed him at the age of 13, he went through a time of rejecting Christianity then embracing it afresh, and with a sense of personal salvation. He's now a 'special needs' teacher in Perth.

I'll give three glimpses of him:

*Cracks in the pavement*. At the age of 13 Harry remembered having played the game of avoiding the cracks in the pavement, with its penalty of being called stupid or other negative names. Now aged 46 he amplifies that common childhood play with its many different anxieties about personal future by referring to his experience in Australia:

"I've also come across this working with autistic kids in Australia. I've got a couple of beauties who won't work on any crack at all in their life. They just stop. They're non-verbal and can't explain, but they just will not walk on cracks… and if you try to force them to which sometimes you have to when you're in a public place, they'll kick out. When I first began work there, there was this kid who would spend an hour getting ready to cross the crack. It was all up in his head – 'psycho stuff'. He'd go back and forward, very agitated. Finally he'd push himself cross it and he'd be all right till he came to the next one. Then years later I had two others who were the same with cracks."

*Thunder and lightning*. 30 years ago, for Harry the associations aroused by thunder and lightning were with ghosts appearing in films, or with the sound of a lion roaring or the noise of earthquakes. Now it takes a different and more transcendent turn. He's with his children in a dinghy off Scarborough Beach in Perth and there's a mighty thunder-storm: "I had three of my kids with me and it was very calm and we were just floating there when suddenly the great black clouds came in a big black circle all

around us – It was the most awesome thing just the way the clouds came in. This was three years ago and the kids still mention it. It's something out of the ordinary. The kids still talk about it...It really makes you think about just how small we are..it was something special, a special feeling...It was one of those situations you probably won't go through again. It was religious. A real sense that wow we are quite small, this world is big and weather can be absolutely ferocious and amazing.. and your strength and your own abilities are quite puny by comparison."

*How does he picture God?* "At 13 it's as a face of burning fire in the sky — powerful and mighty, capable of shrivelling you up like a dried up prune, yet sunny inside and there with you." Now, as he says on the other side of the page, he's portrayed God as "a being who ultimately is CARING and SUPPORTIVE and wanting to draw people to himself". He's reluctant to talk about hell because he sees God as doing as much as possible to bring people to himself. God is neither male nor female, rather a spiritual being.

A second person is **ANITA**, now living in South London. Already at 13 she was declaring her lifelong intent to become a nurse and to help those world-wide, who live in poverty and filth. And, since then, she did indeed train and work as a nurse, mother her children and study for a degree in Social Science. She now works as an on-line nurse consultant. In her youth she went every week to a Baptist church along with her younger brothers and friends, but she had her own views as to what was credible. Thus, according to what she said in the original interview, "when you're dead you're dead" yet she prayed — church, school or bed; maybe seeking something, maybe praising, or when you know you've done something wrong — and you know you've been helped because "you get a feeling like something has fallen off." Jesus took on everyone's sins and died for us. "If we believe that he done that for us, then, like God up there, he's got a pad with all the things that we've done wrong. If we believe that and become Christians, he sort of rubs it all out."

What has happened to Anita's beliefs since? She's little time any longer for institutional religion, especially when violence and judgemental rejection is involved. She finds the language of sacrifice for sins quite meaningless; it was all right for people who were not educated, but now it just does not make sense...Yet now, unlike when she was still at school, death is no longer the end — the spirit, soul, essence, who you are, doesn't die; she's seen it go when she's been with someone as they die... And Anita's sense of God is stronger than ever, not vengeful, but enabling us all to become better, helping us to raise ourselves higher than we were. She focuses on this powerful resource when she prays. She still responds to the teaching of Jesus in the gospels, but she can make little of the language of Trinity. That said, she's pleased her older son has started going to a Pentecostal church of his own accord, and she thinks the younger one may do the same. But that's not for her. However much she appreciates the fellowship of church, engagement with institutional church language has become too strained. Would she call herself a Christian? Sighing: yes.

## Some final remarks

I still find the research enormously rewarding – and the participants seem to do so as well. I've had no one balking or stopping once they've got under way either originally or in the follow up. There's a mass of evidence shedding light on how understanding grows and flourishes or stunts and lies shallow – and religious understanding and discernment with it.

The **crucial moments** which are emerging are predictably:

- employment experience
- friendships, mating and marriage
- parental death and personal ill health
- birthing and rearing of children
- holidays
- global events and tragedies

But also mind-changing moments, such as from reading or watching book/film/tv, or exposure to difference through work or travel. These are mentioned far more frequently than drugs and alcohol use, or sexual activity

Finally, I have a strong sense that in England at least there is a pervasive deficit condition wherein many adults, from whatever religious backgrounds realise that the meaning of traditional religious vocabulary has come to mean less and less to them. Many of them are no longer actively engaged with formal religious belonging and even those who are have not been helped to correlate the massive changes in technology, media communications, sexual behaviour and life expectancy with their own understanding of religious language.

Provision for good interpretative RE within public education is an important means of addressing this need not only for children and young people, but also for parents and grandparents. But faith community leaders must also take urgent steps to give priority to this on their own premises. The alternative is a schizophrenic condition in which God talk and Religion become consigned to the periphery of life. This is now as crucial a moment as there ever was in the lateral and longitudinal life span of the churches – or in that of any other faith community. To ignore it is to belittle their inherent capacity as natural theologians.

Elisabet Haakedal

# 4. Good RE? Enthusiastic Workbook Texts and Pleasant Memories of a Youngster: A Nordic Perspective

Although Norwegian Religious Education (RE) since 2008 has a greater emphasis on 'learning about' religious and secular main traditions, there is still a possibility for the children and youngsters to 'learn from' the traditions at school. In this article I will use 'learning from' as a phrase more or less synonymous with the ideas of 'theologizing' and 'philosophizing' with children. The article aims at presenting and discussing some RE workbook texts and memories of "Sophie" (a pseudonym) who is a lively girl with a mixed-faith family background. She has taken part in stimulating RE in the lower secondary school (ages 13-15). The following lines indicate her voice.

> RE is one of my favourite school subjects. […] I pray in my own way. […] I do not know what I believe in. […] I still believe in God.

In what ways will a particular choice from a young girl's RE workbook texts over a period of three years during the first decade of the 21st century, and from her spontaneous utterances (like the above lines) during these years, indicate changes in her spirituality and/or philosophy of life? To what degree, and how, may the girl's RE textbooks and her RE teacher have stimulated her spiritual formation? And, should her pleasant memories from the RE lessons at the lower secondary school be understood as signs of "good RE practice"? These research questions are chosen for comparative reasons and correspond roughly with foci in other resent research projects on religion and youth.

On the basis of a hermeneutical epistemology, my position as a Norwegian researcher of RE implies some preconditions: Children and youngsters should be respected as persons. Their voices should be listened to,

particularly with regard to their active contributions to their spiritual formation[43], their philosophy of or attitude to life.[44] When constructing or discovering such contributions, which may be rooted in family traditions, RE subject matter, youth culture and media influence, and their own reasoning and preferences, children and youngsters are engaged in a general search for orientation in life.

Thus, 'learning from' in RE involves everyday bodily practices and experiences, reflections on values, attitudes, images and notions, all referring to matters of transcendence and/or immanence.[45] The metaphor of a chain of memory[46] is here used as a sociological reference to religion. It indicates a dynamic interaction between the leaders/experts of a tradition and the participating audience. RE teachers belong to a particular type of experts contributing to the learning processes of their students. As for the concepts of philosophy of life and spirituality, both refer to close connections between notions of belief and moral.[47] For space reasons, I have only explored Sophie's reflective texts and utterances telling about her ritual practice. Texts referring to work on ethical themes are left out. I concentrate on some particular aspects of spirituality which are emphasised in ethnographic studies relevant to Sophie's mixed-faith family background.[48]

In the Norwegian school system, RE has included world religions and Humanism since 1997. In 2008 the profile of the RE syllabus was again changed: Compulsory RE must be "objective, critical and pluralistic" according to the European Court of Human Rights. This was the time of Sophie's lower secondary schooling.

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[43] Sagberg 2008.
[44] Haakedal 2011.
[45] Haakedal 2004.
[46] Hervieu-Léger 1998.
[47] Haakedal 2004, Sagberg 2008.
[48] Arweck & Nesbitt 2010; 2011.

## *4.1. Sophie's RE workbooks and textbooks – and her RE teacher*

Recent research agrees that Norwegian RE in school depends heavily on textbooks.[49] Sophie's RE textbooks will be referred to because traces of them are easily found in her workbooks. Her memories and spontaneous utterances also include references to an active RE teacher whose written comments appear explicitly in her workbooks and implicitly in some of her texts.

The presentation of Sophie is designed as a case study. I aim at being fair to her self-understanding while also applying relevant theoretical approaches for a deeper understanding. Sophie is 'a global person'. She has an ethnic non-Norwegian Muslim father and an ethnic Christian-Humanistic Norwegian mother. Both believe in God but were not practicing their religion to a high degree while Sophie grew up. The family lived in the father's country for seven years of her childhood. During this time Sophie to some degree developed a Muslim cultural identity, having received Muslim RE at school and taken part in Muslim festivals and rituals. Before she entered lower secondary school Sophie and her mother moved back to Norway. When she was in the middle of her final year (she was then 15 and could make her own decisions), I asked her if I might write about her as part of my research and include information from earlier informal conversations. She agreed, lent me her workbooks and willingly talked about her beliefs and texts during an interview. Sophie has read this article, given comments and suggested a few changes. The final text is my responsibility.

During more than 20 years as a teacher educator I have met pupils of mixed-faith families and mixed cultural backgrounds in many classrooms. They have been a minority among the majority of Christian Protestants and other well defined faith and world view minorities. For the sake of spiritual educational fairness, voices like Sophie's should be researched and heard in classrooms.

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[49] Haakedal 2004.

**Sophie's first lower secondary year**

The first chapter of the textbook, *Horizons 8*, deals with "the big questions".[50] The following text appears on the second page of Sophie's (age 13) workbook:

> The big questions
> Wondering about life
> Here are some questions about life and existence (the world):
>
> Who am I? I am a human being, a girl called Sophie.
> Why am I here? I am here because I was created.
> What is the meaning of life? I am not quite sure.
> Where does the world come from? The world comes from God.
> Do God, gods or a divine power exist? Yes, God exists.
> Is there a life after death? Yes, I believe so.

Sophie's answers to questions copied from the textbook show faith in the existence of God, in creation and in an afterlife. She has no fixed answer regarding the meaning of life. Generally, Sophie is trustful and outspoken. Just before entering secondary school, she told me that she was uneasy when thinking about the afterlife. A little anxiety then seemed to be part of her spiritual motivation. A few pages along in the same workbook Sophie is still engaged with the theme of wondering, believing and thinking:

> My philosophical question / challenge / problem
> Do heaven and hell exist? It is said in some religions that it exists. Sometimes I wonder if some Muslims pray five times a day in order not to go to hell, rather than because they want to and love God. I wonder if one has to do all that is written in the Holy book one

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[50] Holth & Deschington 2006.

believes in, in order to go to heaven, or if it is enough to do the good one feels like doing.

The teacher has put a comment in the margin: "I look forward to reading your answers, Sophie. Already now I see that this is going to be exciting." Sophie's text indicates her preoccupation with the afterlife. The comment is the first sign of written communication between teacher and student in RE. No wonder Sophie called him her "fantastic" RE teacher. Directly after this text, Sophie seems to have started working on the second textbook chapter, "Religions and world views today". Her workbook text may be a result of a task formulated by the teacher:

This period we are working with what religion is and about different characteristics of religions. I have read that there are several cultures and religions in one place now (which was not so much the case earlier), because nowadays people travel around the world much more than before. I think it is interesting to discuss in RE and to read about different religions and world views. Religions are often very different, but still have much in common. I have often thought about religion and thought about what will happen after we die. Sometimes I get anxious when I think about what may happen after I die. I have thought quite a lot about heaven and hell. Even if religions are different, I think that all religions want people to live a good life. I have experienced different cultures and religions and do not have much against participating in seeing and hearing about things from other religions. I respect the faith of others, but I am often annoyed when people misuse religion. Also, I do not like that people bully or speak badly about other people's faith or religion. Religion should make peace, but if people misuse it there may often be trouble. I think people should not judge the religion of a person only by knowing him or her, and think that the religion is as this person uses it.

Sophie still writes about her thoughts of the afterlife. However, she is also annoyed by generalized conceptions about different religions. Sophie told about her schoolmates' prejudiced and ridiculing remarks about Muslims. During her first year she was particularly sore about this.

At the end of the autumn term and the beginning of the spring term of her first year Sophie worked on Islam. The content here generally covers historical information, but by drawing meticulously Sophie may have wanted to show pride in the religious culture of her father. She has drawn the Kabah and an Arabic script giving her added translation:

> This writing means 'Allah the Almighty' and is written in the Quran, God's revelation to the prophet Mohammad, gathered and written down approx. in the year 650.

## Sophie's second year

During the second year Sophie's two workbooks include several long 'free texts' documenting her thoughts and opinions on faith questions and moral issues. There are many encouraging remarks from her RE teacher. Sophie often gets top marks. The teacher has chosen his own progress with regard to the textbook chapters. Two texts, next to each other at the end of the first workbook, follow:

> My opinion about: A multireligious society
>
> […] I think it is great that Norway is a multireligious society, and I think that most people also think that it is very all right that they may believe in what they want to. […] But even if most religions are accepted here in Norway, I feel that some religions are suppressed and looked down upon. E.g. I do not think that it is much fun to say to people that half of my family is Muslim, because incredibly many here in Norway have a very conservative way of thinking about Muslims (I feel). I often experience that people talk nonsense about Islam, or other religions

[…], without my daring to reply that much. Sometimes I agree, other times I don't. It is quite all right that people have their own opinions about other religions and cultures, but since we live in a multireligious society after all, we could be a little more careful about the ways we express ourselves. To live in a multireligious society is very exciting. We have much to learn from others. There is much fun we could discuss and look upon from different perspectives. However, if people could learn to have a little more respect for other religions, and didn't think so conservatively, that would have been great!

GOD HAS NOT CREATED HUMAN BEINGS. HUMAN BEINGS HAVE CREATED GOD.

I am a little for both sides. Most people on earth, however, believe in some form of transcendence [author's comment: Sophie here used the Norwegian word for 'superstition' but indicated later that what she had meant was rather a belief in 'something more'], and all of them couldn't possibly be totally wrong. One religion or one world view must be right. Or be based on something which must be 'the answer'. And all the beautiful in the nature must have had a 'designer'. On the other hand it may be that human beings created 'God' to be able to have laws and rules to live according to.

In the first text, Sophie seems to be very comfortable with the freedom of belief she finds in the Norwegian society. However, she complains about experiences of ridicule about Islam. She has not dared to speak up for this religious culture which she does not totally identify with. She wants people to show respect towards those who do not think the same as themselves. In the second text, Sophie shows her uncertainty about religious matters. The title here (the two statements) seems to have been given by the teacher, challenging the students to make up their own minds or give their opinions.

At the end of her second workbook, Sophie has written a long text about her Humanistic confirmation ritual and her reflections about it. The fact that the RE teacher has asked the students to write about this testifies to the central position of the ritual (whether Christian, Humanistic or 'private') in the Norwegian culture. Indirectly, Sophie tells that to be different (not having a confirmation program and family party) in this culture is quite hard for a youngster. A Humanistic ritual suited her, and both parents agreed. She told me that she asked her confirmation teacher if one could have a Humanistic confirmation and still believe in God, receiving a negative answer. Even so, her confirmation speech shown in her workbook confirms her belief in God. Her confidence in herself shines through in the text.

**Sophie's third year**

From Sophie's final year I will first show her interpretation of two religious texts. It seems that her RE teacher has not chosen the tasks from the textbook directly[51], but given the students more opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings.

> A poem from Mahayana Buddhism:
> TO FIND CONFIDENCE IN LIFE AND DEATH.
> I like this excerpt because it describes a feeling everyone may get during troubles. One does not quite know what to believe in and to whom one will turn for help. Everyone likes to know that there are someone who cares and loves you and points at a way out when something goes wrong. This excerpt gives a feeling of confidence and love and that someone is there for you, and that one knows what one believes in and trusts him. One who always is there for you regardless of what happens.
>
> Paul's letter to the Romans, in the Bible:

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[51] Holth & Kallevik 2008, 68.

NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US FROM GOD'S LOVE.

This text I like because it gives strength to believe in God even if we do not see him. It is written that "How can one have hope in that which they see?" I think this is a good sentence, for hope is after all something good that one waits for with patience, one cannot hope something which already is there. This text brings forth good and warm aspects of God. > "God is the one who absolves. Who may then condemn?" Here it is written that NOTHING can separate us from God's love, and this is how I think it should be.

Another task in the textbook[52] states: "In our society today, there are quite a lot of people who say that they do not believe in God. What do you think may be the reason for this?" Sophie's answer speaks for itself:

We have spoken a little about this theme in the class lately, and this has answered some questions which I had before, and it made me open my eyes a bit more. The fact that people say that they believe in God, or don't do it, may have several reasons. One reason may be that we do not have time for God in our daily life anymore. We in the West generally have good lives, and we feel that we no longer need strength from a higher power. It may be that we are Humanists, places the human being in a central position or rather ourselves (egoism).

Religious 'laws' or 'commandments' do not suit the way we live. Sex outside marriage, not to tell lies, love your neighbour like yourself … do we follow any of these?

We do not believe in that which cannot be proved. We only believe what the eyes believe, not what the heart will believe.

Is it 'uncool' or 'not in' to believe in God? At any rate, this is how it is for many 'not Christians, but otherwise religious' youngsters.

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[52] Holth & Kallevik 2008, 73.

It may certainly be difficult for many young Christians too, but they are in majority and may support each other.

Do people bear the thought of heaven and hell? This may be a good reason.

We have enough of everything. We do not need to ask for anything anymore (literally spoken).

Many think perhaps that God represents too much stress, and many do not see any positive development in religions. They think that it only generates war and disagreement.

Sophie's work on "Some religious movements of our time" (the textbook's chapter four) is extensive but will not be covered here. However, this work shows traces of an independent RE teacher who has had enthusiastic responses from a student who is spiritually searching and 'on the move'.

## 4.2. A discussion of Sophie's spirituality and attitude to Religious Education

The particular choice of texts from Sophie's RE workbooks as well as her spontaneous utterances shows some changes in her reflective and ritual attitude to life related to cultural and social contexts. Her texts have traces of (self-) formation referring to her moving back from an Asian Muslim culture to a Norwegian Humanistic and Christian culture of welfare, commercialisation and secularisation. As a 13 year old, Sophie's spontaneous remark, "I pray in my own way", showed a rather weak link to traditional normative Muslim practice although she kept the rules of fasting during her first lower secondary year and went with her family to the local assembly of prayers and festivity for Eid ul-Fitr. At the end of the lower secondary period, however, this public Muslim ritual context was no longer natural for her, she said. Her Christian and (secular) Humanist friends combined with liberal attitudes in her closest family are probably the main

reasons for this. She valued her Humanist confirmation class and family party. She also confirmed her individual style of communicating with God on a daily basis, showing some continuity with her mixed religious upbringing. Arweck and Nesbitt[53] apply the metaphor of religion as "a chain of memory" in their qualitative study of 28 mixed-faith families in England. They find that the parents in question often have not had a strong socialization within their respective religious traditions. Thus, the 'chain' has weakened or been broken at an earlier stage in relation to the children and young people who were the researchers' primary interest. Sophie did not want 'to be different' from her friends with regard to the ritual of confirmation, and being conscious of her double religious heritage she accepted the offer of (secular) Humanism.

As for notions and beliefs, Sophie changed from referring to an authoritative creator God, including signs of anxiety when thinking about the afterlife, to a vaguer belief in a protecting and forgiving God. A German study tells about the boy "Jakob" (pseudonym) who is younger than Sophie but has a similar mixed-faith background. Like her he believes in a caring, generous God.[54] Sophie quite soon adapted to the Norwegian culture where freedom of religion and world view is emphasized. "I do not know what I believe", she sometimes underlined when asked whether she was a Muslim, an Agnostic or even a Christian. At the end of her lower secondary school she showed signs of a private spirituality with elements from Muslim and Christian monotheism and open-ended Humanism. She maintained believing in and praying regularly to one God common to all mankind. She had, however, also learnt to distinguish between the different insider positions of believers and outsider positions of students of religions and world views. This last point, a sign of religious literacy, as well as her regular informal praying, makes Sophie different from the majority of the youngsters interviewed and discussed in a big American study of young people's beliefs and practices.[55]

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[53] Arweck & Nesbitt 2010; 2011.
[54] Arnold, Hanish, Orth 1997.
[55] Smith 2010.

To what degree, and how, may Sophie's RE textbooks and her RE teacher have stimulated her spiritual formation? A tentative answer will suffice here. In a resent qualitative study of 154 Norwegian youngsters, eight out of ten put school as an important place to learn about religion, while one out of two reported family as an important source of learning. The majority seemed to have an attitude of indifference to religion. However, some reported that they were religious believers while others had a clear secular position. Half of them supported RE at school, one fourth did not want RE and one fifth thought RE should be optional. The majority thought that what they learnt in RE helped them develop tolerance towards religious diversity.[56] The choice from Sophie's texts indicates that she had gained both knowledge and understanding through RE. Compared with the students in Lippe's study Sophie showed more enthusiasm. It is reasonable to think that she in particular has been influenced by her RE teacher in her spiritual formation, as well as by her close family and friends.

Should Sophie's pleasant memories of her RE lessons at the lower secondary school be understood as signs of "good RE"? Although I am probably in a biased position regarding this question, I think that Sophie's texts and the remarks from her teacher are signs of an RE which favours a dialogue between the students and the subject matter in a way that encourages spiritual growth. Sophie spoke enthusiastically of her teacher, presenting him as both witty and able to transmit an interest in the subject matter. A dialogue was going on between them. Concerning beliefs, an image of God as loving and forgiving seems to have attracted Sophie. She also spoke up against stereotyping utterances about certain positions of belief, particularly remarks about Islam. One may ask whether she and her class mates should have been encouraged to widen their understanding of Islam, and whether Sophie in particular should have been encouraged to learn more from the diversity of this tradition.

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[56] Lippe 2008.

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Dana Hanesova

# 5. Listening to Children: A Welcoming RE Environment

## *5.1. Introduction*

Though the paramount aim of confessional **Religious Education (RE)** in Slovakia is to develop one's personal belief and commitment to a specific religion, we believe that this school subject should view the child as a complex being. Creating a stimulating learning environment in RE facilitates not only the spiritual and moral development of the child, but the development of the whole child, including the emotional, social, intellectual and physical dimensions of his/her personality. Its supreme goal is the overall integrity of the child.

This study presents some results from observing and listening to a group of eight year old children during my RE lessons. My research was based on the assumption that RE should offer enough quality space where not only the teacher, but also the pupils could express their feelings and thoughts. So the pupils cooperate with the teacher and they become partners in education. Creating an environment full of trust and acceptance opens the door to children communicating their feelings, images, concepts, doubts and arguments.

Before sharing the records of children's utterances about God and the Scriptures in our RE lessons, I considered it important to show the framework of Slovak RE. The aim of RE, its learning environment including the roles of teachers and learners are introduced in the first chapter. In the second part some extracts from specific interaction with children are presented. They demonstrate that it is possible to create such an

environment in RE lesson where the children play an active role openly sharing their feelings and thoughts

## 5.2. The context of Religious Education in Slovak schools

**Slovak model of Religious Education**

The Slovak confessional system of RE reminds the RE models in the majority of EU countries.[57]

Children from the age of 6 have to choose either RE or 'neutral' Ethical Education. The aim of RE is to lead the child *into* personal *involvement with a certain religion or Christian denomination*. Children learn about their religion 'from inside'. Teaching *about other religions* has been given only fractional attention in RE.[58] Only very exceptionally is there certain openness to learning *from other religions* in the sense of recognizing them to be a source of meaning and life orientation.[59] So RE in Slovak state schools is similar to teaching RE in church schools or in parishes. All 18 registered religious societies have a legal right to teach their own RE in state schools. Some churches even prepare their students for the first communion during the school RE.

Of course RE as teaching *into* religion has had its opponents (both in Slovakia and abroad, e.g. Hull, J. 1986) who argue that the task to disseminate religious principles of a certain denomination should be done under the direct control of denominations on their own ground, not in state schools. But due to the fact that 3/4 of Slovak population[60] consider

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[57] Hanesova, D. 2006 & Kuyk, E. et al. 2007.
[58] The students acquire their knowledge of major world religions, denominations and sects via Social Sciences.
[59] Hull, J. 2001; Schreiner, P. 2002.
[60] according to the last census in 2011.

themselves to be Christians (2011), the traditional RE model of teaching *into* Christian religion has had substantial parental support.

## Teachers of Religious Education

Though RE teachers in Central and Eastern Europe invest a big effort into building functional relationships with the youth they are often frustrated by the results. Many students have suspicious attitude towards teachers as formal authority. According to CityGate[61], assisting youth in post-communists countries, they have "a mental mode of educational environments which revolve around the teacher rather than the student. The teacher is the centre, the teacher is active. The students are passive and bored." Thus the present task of RE teachers is to search for ways to transform the inadequate forms of RE without losing track of the Biblical message. „In countries where the leadership context has been authoritarian, the learning environment needs to allow for the development of informal relationships, and a degree of transparency and vulnerability from those in authority. Authenticity, informality and being relational are an important part of an effective learning environment".[62]

Some insight into the RE teachers' thinking in Slovakia was gained via questionnaires based on the Post-Critical Belief Scale[63].[64] Two thirds of the responding teachers verbalized the symptoms of the "Second Naivité" belief. They believe the Holy scriptures are a guide, full of signs, in the search for God, and not a historical account; Interestingly, 85% teachers preferred

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[61] CityGate facilitates the students from EE to articulate their assumptions using the following procedure. They asked them to choose one picture out of a big number of them according to the image of God they believe. It opened some people to better understand why they hold this view. Thus they built trust and communication in order to identify deeper levels of belief and the issues participants needed to work through. Trust is built through giving people the experience of being listened to, having questions and answers respected and being understood.

[62] Livecche, M. 2004, 2008:28.

[63] Ziebertz, H. G.& Riegel, U. et al 2009.

[64] An international research with the Slovak sample of 300 R. E. teachers and catechists, oganized by H. G. Ziebertz, U. Riegel , D. Hanesova et al in 2006.

teaching *into* religion, teaching *about* religion was supported by 76.6% and teaching *from* religion by 72.7% of teachers. The fact that so many respondents supported all three models may be a result of the wider societal and historical context. The communist ideology has had unimaginably damaging effects on people's development of autonomous thinking and religious self-awareness.

**Children as active subjects**

Teachers' image of pupil's roles in Slovakia has changed due to the shift from teacher-centred into learner-centred education. The proponents of *constructivism* and *humanization in education* underline the holistic approach to children and the need to treat them as **active subjects**.[65] They stress the importance of child's interaction with the environment. Constructivism opened the door to new teaching techniques, e.g. problem solving, creative thinking and group work. RE should also avoid "a unilateral, esoterical action separating a person from the problems of life in the real world".[66]

In practice several countries which experienced indoctrination are still missing suitable methodology developing higher thinking skills. It has been evident in most subjects, including RE Teachers struggle to create information gaps to grasp pupils' attention and to encourage their active construction of concepts. Some of them neglect integration of RE concepts with knowledge of other subjects. This ends in dualistic thinking when the children seem to use ready-made answers. These remind us of Piaget's *suggested conviction* - a wide use of answers that are virtually just the consequence of the asked question.[67] Sometimes they say things just because they want to please the RE teacher.

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[65] Taggart, G. 2001:325.
[66] Liguš, J. 2003:81.
[67] Piaget, J. 1951:10-11.

Let us support these assumptions by two examples. The first relates to an 8-years-old boy who had to write his homework *My favourite Movie Hero* for his native language class*.* Though during the preliminary class discussion he seemed to be naturally very enthusiastic about Star Wars and the Matrix films, his final version of the project started with, "My favourite film hero is the Lord Jesus. He was born... His life was ..." etc. The teacher, partially confused by this discrepancy, asked himself, "Is Jesus really his favourite film hero? Does the person of Jesus belong to the category of film heroes anyway? To what extent is it his opinion?" The same child, being 6-years-old, asked "Who were those giants in the Old Testament?" and immediately gave an complex answer, most probably heard at home. Obviously this is an example of a strong parental influence*.*

The second example indicates that some children separate RE from other parts of life. One day right after the school inspection, an RE teacher entered her RE class of 8-year-olds, asking, "Children, I am so happy today! Can you guess why?" Four children gave casual answers, "because of Valentine's day/ your birthday/ carnival". Answers of majority of children seemed to fit the RE lesson, "because God revealed himself to you; He spoke to you; you experienced something with God". Listening to them the teacher wondered, "Are my pupils so spiritual or theologically-minded? Or do their answers point to their subconscious idea that RE teachers belongs into a certain religious 'box'? Did they want to please me or is this their conviction?"

From what has been said so far it can be expected that most children in Slovakia get into contact with Christian theology thanks to adults in their families, churches or school RE Presumably the majority of children starting primary school might have had some encounters with Christian religion, church, prayers, Bible stories and Christian doctrines.

## Creating a powerful environment in RE in Slovakia

According to Slovak educator S. Svec[68] the learning environment consists of "people, relations, situations and teaching aids that facilitate or influence student's learning."

The material and methodological equipment of RE has both strong and weak sides. The potential choice of materials and methods is rich, especially various texts and materials: CDs and DVDs, ICT, quizzes, sketches, competitions, musical instruments, internet, media, films. The teachers are ready to use interactive methods (drama, role plays, simulations, pantomime; authentic activities; art work, posters; discussions, storytelling; projects). However, RE being an elective subject often struggles with unsuitable time schedule and space conditions.

But what matters most is "the personal factor, the encounter and interplay between adult and child, the building of significant relationships between children and adults and among peers".[69] These have decisive significance for the direction of a child's spiritual life.[70] According to K. Kammeyer, "a stimulating learning of new materials and new opinions within the class will only reach a child when it is allowed to bring in its own perspectives".[71] This includes time for two-way sharing and interaction, teacher's skills and ability to welcome and relate to children, and to communicate a sense of belonging. It is the *role of the teacher* to facilitate the learning process by creating the environment and context within which information, knowledge and wisdom can be efficiently interwoven.

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[68] Svec, S. 2008:105.
[69] Sanberg, S. 2011:129.
[70] May, S. et al 2001:209-210.
[71] Kammeyer, K. 2011:97.

How to create a powerful learning environment in RE? How to encourage the children to open themselves to talk with the teacher about their theological thinking? According to J. Valstar[72] a visible sign of a powerful learning environment is the *intention* to optimally facilitate and stimulate the pupils' learning. There are quite a few teachers in Slovakia with this intention. They strive to: a) invite the children to speak directly and individually about the contents of their belief, their understanding of the Bible and their perception of values; b) encourage them to express their religious ideas; c) encourage their mutual interaction during discussions guided by the RE teacher.[73]

## 5.3. Examples of children's utterances during RE lessons

Now I would like to present a few examples of children's utterances. The recordings have been collected in RE class of 8-year-olds during the last year. The research is in its initiatory stage and so the sample has not been analyzed and interpreted properly yet. The reason why I mention it here is to display typical issues that the children have talked about. Others are used purposefully with regard to previous research studies.

**Hot issues**

The following list of hot issues in children's lives was collected during our time of sharing in the circle, sitting on the carpet in the beginning of the lessons: death, heaven, hell; ecology; friendship; forgiveness; other religions, gods; fortune-telling, evil spirits and nightmares; unjust dealings and unfulfilled promises; illness and faith in Jesus. Children worry when they are ill, in conflict with somebody, when a relative leaves home or somebody dies.

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[72] Valstar, J. 2011.
[73] similar to E. Schwarz, 2011:153.

**Where do the children get their theology from?**

Children's theological utterances can be grouped according to different sources of their theology.[74] More research would prove the validity of our suggestions.

a. **Children repeat what they have heard** from adults i.e. parents, grandparents or RE teachers or from art and media created by adults.

> T: How do you imagine *heaven*?
>
> S1: There are clouds.
>
> S2: And angels…
>
> S3: And a huge gate…
>
> S4: It is like a paradise there.
>
> T: Can you describe it a bit?
>
> S4: Yes, there are already various things there ... described in the Bible.

b. **Children make up their own ideas in the context of/or even based on what they heard from adults**.

> T: How do you imagine *heaven*?
>
> S5: And we are walking on the clouds...
>
> S6: You can wish anything and you will get it... almost anything... No, you cannot get everything there. E.g. you cannot wish that something would be destroyed there. And there will be no guns there.
>
> S3: And if anything is destroyed, it will be renewed immediately.
>
> S6: But it will not be possible to hurt anybody in heaven
>
> T: What was *Jesus like* when He was living *on this earth*?
>
> S1: He had a white robe.

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[74] Büttner, G. 2010.

S2, S3: Yes, he wore a white robe.

T: Did he? Anything else?

Ss: Yes, a white robe.

S4: With a red belt.

S5: Yes, a red belt.

T: Did he not wear what other people were wearing?

More Ss: He wore a white robe.

S6: And He had nice eyes.

T: How do you know?

S6: I saw Him in a film.

c. **Children make up their own idea.**

T: How do you imagine *heaven*?

S7: I imagine it... a.... a bit strangely.

T: Why?

S7: I imagine ... that in heaven... there is straw.

T: Straw?

S7: Yes, a lot of straw... And we are sitting on it and talking. (This seems to reflect the fact they their family has just moved into an old farm. They are a big, close-knit family; they try to use any possibility to spend time together and talk.)

T: What was *Jesus like* when He was living *on this earth*?

S7: He was like ... like our teacher Andrew.

T: Like Andrew - your teacher?

S7: Yes, like him, similar age and so ...nice to other people-

(Andrew is a tall slim male teacher, about 38 years old, who supervises these children during afternoon sports activities. He is a natural authority and friend for the children. Boys like to play football with him. They do not have problems obeying him

without any special rewards or punishments. He is like a friend-father for them.)

**Different aspects of children's encounter with God**

Next examples point to the different aspects of a child's encounter with God[75]:

a) Here is an example of a boy from a Christian family who spoke openly about his *personal encounter with a heavenly being*:

> S1: Once ... the Lord Jesus spoke to me... as if He sent His angel to me. I was in my old room and I did not feel well, I was scared. I saw somebody in the door. I thought I only made it up... because I was scared. But then I looked again around my old room ... and I saw somebody ... as an angel in the door to that room.

b) Some children seem to meet God *via the instruction and learned tradition.* They love the Bible stories, they can retell the whole stories and Bible verses by heart. They consider God to be good. Most of our RE lesson interaction could be mentioned here.

c) The third group of children seem to formulate their theological concepts *via discussion with the teacher and other children*:

**T: Can God hear us?**

> Most children: Yeas.
>
> T: How do you know He can hear us?
>
> S1: because when we pray He answers us
>
> T: How?
>
> S1: through our ideas.

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[75] Büttner, G. 2011.

S2: when I am praying for something and then something happens... like good luck. It is from Him... His answer.

S3: Because the Lord God is everywhere

S4: Yes, 'cause He is everywhere

S5: So is He then also in this bottle?

S4: No, He is not.... but He has got ears and can hear everywhere, even under the sea... I saw it in a film.

S6: He has such good hearing that He can even hear behind the door.

S7: It is a mystery... that He can hear everybody.

S8: Once I lost one important small component. So then I prayed in the evening. I felt heaviness on me, I was so worried. So then I prayed... and afterwards it was as if I was lifted off the ground. I felt so light... and then I found it, the lost thing.


**T: Can God speak to us?**

Several Ss: Yes, yes.

T: How? How do you think God speaks?

S1 (speaking slowly and pointing gently to his heart): So ... so *into* my soul... so quietly... into the soul.

S2: He is quietly whispering ... the name: Susan, Susan!

S3: As if He entered into somebody and then spoke through him.

S4: He says something and I hear it as an idea in my mind.

S5: Once I had a hard time. So I told myself: I need to talk with God, just between the two of us.


**T: What is faith?**

S: that He comes during Christmas (something like Father Christmas)

**During the discussion about the Nativity:**

S1: Herod wanted to kill the Lord Jesus when He was born in Bethlehem... He thought the Lord Jesus wanted to become a king. But the Lord Jesus did not want to become a king as other kings were. He wanted to be a king as … as God is a king in the likeness of man ... And so to stay as a normal man.

In this last example we focused on Jesus' temptations. Children started with defining the word *temptation* but through the discussion they faced the theological issue of Satan. The conversation resulted in personal application of temptation:

T: Do you know the *meaning of* the word *temptation?* What do you think temptation means?

S1: It is when you do something wrong and you did not intend to do it.

T: Why was Satan's idea of turning the stones into bread a temptation for Jesus?

S2: Because Satan wanted to tempt him. If Jesus had done what Satan had said, it would have been as if Satan was God for him (Jesus) ... if Jesus had obeyed Satan.

T: Would God the Father have saved Jesus if He had thrown himself down as Satan tempted him?

Ss: No, he would not.

S2: No... but ... yes, He could have. But He would have been terribly angry with Him, because it would have been as if Satan was on his level. Maybe Jesus would have done it to stop Satan's provocations, but He knew that it would have meant that Satan won.

T: So how did he win over the temptation?

S2: He prayed.

S3: Because He was God's son.

S2: Satan is afraid of prayer.

S4: But when we go to bed, my brothers and me – we pray: God, forgive me... and I pray for my father because he does not believe that God exists.

S5: I have temptations when I want to pray...

S6: Yes, me to... Once when I was going to pray in my bed, I saw a high black wall. And I said to myself I would pray a bit later... but then I fell asleep and I did not pray.

S5: The temptation for me is that when I want to pray, I do not really want to pray.

S7: I had temptation when I broke my arm. I was very angry with God. You know, I had to go to the orthopaedics every day. For a long time I had pain and it was not good. I got used to my badly healed arm. Then I fell again and I broke my arm again. And I was even angrier with God then. I had another surgery. After that I realized that it was good that I fell again because they should operate on my arm and it could heal well then. It ended best.

**Teaching aids encouraging children's thinking theologically**

**Films and cartoons** can have a big impact on children's construction of concepts. In our lesson we used a 30 minutes cartoon about the prodigal son. The children's responses were collected in three stages: a) during watching it; b) immediate reaction after watching it; c) one week after watching it.

a. *During watching the cartoon* the children were making the comments about the prodigal son destroying the property, wrong money management, robbery, stealing, pretending, false friends, power of money, hunger, etc.

b. *After watching the cartoon* the children were asked to pretend they were reporters who had to visit the prodigal son and his family in his village and to ask them individually what happened. The first task was to give the story a title.

Most children emphasized the loss of money and property, e.g.: A good but not functioning idea. Losing everything. Lost money. Money is not life. Wasted money. Life is not money. Lost money. The son being abroad. To learn from something. Advice how to avoid losing money. Obey your parents and do not have your own dreams – so you will avoid spending all your property.

Children from Christian families created more theological titles: The lost son. The dead son and the living son. The lonely son. He came to his senses. He wanted to have a clean heart. He obeyed Satan. Who is prodigal – the one that is stuck up. Father – God. Forgiveness. A wise and sensible son. The older son – the man without sins?

c. The home assignment *one week after watching it* was to write and/or draw a newspaper report about the event. Most of the children wrote the shortened version of the Bible story. The assistance of the parents was evident in them. Below are two reports with some elements of original comprehension of the text:

Child 1 drew four pictures and accompanied them by this text: One man had two sons. One day the younger son wanted his part of the inheritance but *at the same time wanted to be allowed to stay in his father's home. His father did not want to be strict so he gave that to him.* Then the younger son went abroad and spent everything there. One day he said to himself …

Child 2: Recently a very interesting story happened in our village. A certain rich man had two sons. The younger son asked the father to give him a lot of money - his part of inheritance. Then he left his home. There was no news about him for a long time. *The father thought he had already died.* Then one day he returned - poor, ragged and hungry. He asked his father for forgiveness. The father accepted him with joy and he prepared a big banquet. *How good that he did not first meet his older brother* because he was not happy about his return. The father rebuked him and asked him to rejoice over the return of the *missing* brother.

Another means stimulating interaction in RE lessons are pictures. For the purpose of comparison I used pictures showing two children praying for their ill guinea pigs and one dying in the end. They were previously used in a German context.[76]

As I did not want the children to influence each other's first impressions, I simply handed out the pictures and they had to write what both children might have thought or said in all three situations. Of course the individual oral conversations would have been richer as the 8-year-olds are still not good writers and some of them – especially SEN children - avoid writing.

It was possible to distinguish several categories of responses of the boy whose guinea pig died. Except for 1 child all the other children understood the need to mourn.
Only 1 girl from a strict religious family showed a sign of total subordination to God's will without any emotional expression: „Well, he died. Please, Jesus, let him come to you."

One boy without religious family background tried to do his best by expressing the typical funeral phrase, „Let him rest in peace."

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[76] Büttner, G. 2010 & 2011.

Besides 5 children describing the boy as a mourning and crying person, the remaining 13 children expressed their attitudes towards the situation. They are so typical for all humanity:

- Blaming oneself: "If I had another one I would take a better care of him";
- Regretting: "And I could not say good-bye to him" – if he did, the death would be more bearable;
- Crying with reproach: "Why did he have to die?" (4 responses)
- Crying with reproach combined with self-pity, trying to find the ethical reasons for this: "Why did this happen to me?" "Why did only mine die?" "Am I so bad?" (4 responses)
- Getting angry with God, rejecting God and the need to depend on Him: "Oh, no, he died! God surely does not exist. I will stop believing in him. But if I had him again, I would take a better care of him."
- Anger, resentment and strong reproaching God:  "Why did he have to die finally? Why, God, why? Why did you allow it to happen? Why? You are a horrible God."

## *5.4. Conclusion*

Having experimented with listening to children during the RE lessons in Slovak state schools, I can confirm the validity of G. Büttner's statement[77] that many of the carefully pre-arranged conversations do not result in what was expected. The children often said nothing or very little about the issues I was asking them about. The majority of their theological expressions emerged rather unexpectedly. I learnt to be flexible to accept unprepared discussion topics initiated by the children. I tried to do my best to make notes or recordings from the RE lessons.

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[77] Büttner, G. 2010: 359.

Our 'listening-to-children's-utterances research during RE lessons have been based on premises similar to TWC principles expressed by G. Büttner[78]:

- Children have the capacity to interpret their world religiously.
- The theological interaction with children can bring its fruit in RE only if the RE teacher nourishes and supports it wholeheartedly.
- The evidence of children having joy and fun while being involved in theological discussions has already started to prove the importance of the environment created by the RE teacher. Even the negative experiences underline this principle.
- Though the process of gaining the evidence of children's ability to handle their pre-knowledge and new impulses creatively and actively, it has been encouraging to watch it grow and develop, hopefully for the learner's sake.

As a result of my research I discovered some basic characteristics of a motivating learning environment of RE An inspiring physical learning environment has to be inter-twinned with development of personal relationship and interest in children's well-being. If it is not adequate to the learner's inner state the cognitive output of RE lessons will achieve only the level of lower cognitive functions, such as learning facts by heart. The RE teachers need to take a lot of time for building a good rapport with children (e.g. morning sharing circles). They have to deal with this issue especially if RE is the only subject they teach at a certain school. How precious are the RE lessons where the stimulating learning environment activates not only the spiritual facet of the child's being but the overall development of the child's personality, including his/her higher thinking skills capable of cognitive construction of theological concepts.

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[78] Büttner, G. 2010.

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Sturla Sagberg

# 6. The Concept of "Child" and the Search for Powerful Learning Environments. A Norwegian Perspective

## *6.1. Introduction*

Child theology is a young concept. It is to be expected that many questions to the meaning of it and of its significance in church education[79] are still very open, as it was documented at the Loccum conference in 2009[80]:

- How many different impulses can a child bear in its learning process, in terms of identity formation?
- What does it mean to keep difficult questions open for children to explore, when it comes to questions of existential faith?
- How can didactics of religion communicate with children's identity formation in a post-modern culture?
- How can children's own narrative structure of reality relate to theology?

These questions point in the direction of two important issues:

1. How is the concept *child* actually understood and shaped in child theology? Is the child in Norwegian church education perceived in the same way as in, say, British Religious Education or in Polish catechesis? Does the concept of the child that I hold with my frame of reference, actually correspond with the way a child understands herself today?

2. How do different understandings and conceptual frameworks affect children's *identity* formation in a church context?

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[79] I use the expression "church education" as a general term, as education in a church context may in some contexts be catechesis, in other contexts induction into faith practice or life in church, with more or less emphasis on doctrine and faith tradition.
[80] Roebben, 2011.

In this paper the child concept is discussed in relation to the so called new child paradigm and the effects of that paradigm on church education, and on how this education may support children in their construction of identity. The paper is summed up in some suggested trajectories for further research and development of the issues in question, based on experiences from Norwegian church education.

## 6.2. A new concept of the child and its roots

The last two decades have seen an expansion of literature concerning "the new child paradigm", and it has been claimed that there is also a specifically Nordic version of that paradigm, closely connected to the Nordic model of the welfare society.[81] That model is built on a social democracy where all members of society should be cared for and have a say, regardless of income or status. Child perspective is, according to this model, interpreted as "children's perspective"[82].[83]

New or not, this paradigm has several roots. One is the recognition of human rights, including special rights of the child.[84] Another root is found in historical studies of the Reformation and of the Enlightenment period that gave birth to so diverse phenomena as Pietism, Romanticism and Rationalism.[85] A third root is found in the ancient church.[86] The Reformation and the time of Enlightenment brought a modern understanding of the individual, but still within relatively homogenous religious societies. Our time witnesses, however, a variety of religions and worldviews in open competition that is somewhat analogous to the time of the early church.

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[81] It is disputable whether there really is a new paradigm of the child in a strict scientific sense, but there is certainly a new emphasis on the child as subject. (Sommer, Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010).

[82] Sommer, et al., 2010.

[83] In a German context the two perspectives are both contained in the concept *Kindertheologie* (Sagberg, 2010).

[84] UN, 1959; UNICEF, 1989.

[85] Bunge, 2001.

[86] Bakke, 2005; Sandnes, Skarsaune, & Aasgaard, 2009; Sæbø, 2010.

Some versions of child theology rest on an understanding of faith that is inspired by *patristic spirituality*.

Different views of the child as a religious subject are also to be seen in the educational programme of Church of Norway. The notion of *catechesis* has been supplanted with a so-called "expanded concept of faith education", in terms of a "socio-cultural pedagogy with an emphasis on total learning, learning in fellowship, learning through practice and learning in a natural context".[87] The church education programme changed its name accordingly, from "baptismal education" (catechesis) to "faith education". This change has been justified with the fact of increased plurality of faith communities. Some do not emphasize baptism that much in their teaching, while "faith" is a common concept for all.

Some theologians have launched quite heavy criticisms against this loss of sacramental foundation.[88] Skard Dokka's point is that church education is a matter of inducting children into faith practice, and that a *cognitively oriented education* must be derived from *sacramental practice*. Following Skard Dokka, it seems to me that the *Faith Education Programme* wavers between two equally important forces: 1) It is necessary to focus on that part of Christianity which contributes to identity formation and coping in a pluralistic society, and therefore explore and develop symbols and language that communicate to late modern society; 2) it is equally important to provide specific, traditional Christian theology. The relationship between faith practice and sacramental practice remains unresolved in Norwegian faith education, and this ambiguity follows the development of child theology as well.

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[87] Hauglin, Lorentzen, & Mogstad, 2008, p. 222, my translation.
[88] Skard Dokka, 2007.

## *6.3. The power of a traditional Christian view of the child*

An important question both now and in antiquity concerns the power of a Christian view of the child. It is a historical fact that the Christian focus on the child as a candidate for eternal life, grounded in the example of Jesus and in central apostolic theology, contributed strongly towards changing social practices also outside of the faith community. Children could no longer be treated as beings with marginal significance in society.[89] It should be added that the movement from the margins of society to the centre has taken very long time, and the journey has taken some paradoxical turns. It should also be noted that this movement has a largely Western horizon, and it can be seen parallel with the development from pre-modern to modern, democratic societies.[90] There are still societies where children are regarded as the property of their parents, even to be sold if they happen to be girls. This is not only a question of immoral practice, but of an *accepted* practice, and consequently, a matter of how to think about children.

In pre-modern cultures many social practices presuppose that all should understand themselves as part of a *cosmic totality*.[91] Children should therefore enter this totality from the beginning, and, growing up, take part in the work to maintain life. In order to do that, they need to adapt to the reigning world view. Through various *rites de passage* they are introduced to new responsibilities, but *within a culture of continuity*.

With the advent of modernity arenas of learning were increasingly constructed apart from arenas of production. "Culture is no more presented to children as a holistic life form, but as two stages: first, as pedagogical training, as for strangers. This requires special institutions".[92] The present understanding of child culture and youth culture relies on this modern transformation: "After this we not only present other life forms for the

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[89] Cunningham, 1996, p. 52.
[90] Maritain, 1949; Mollenhauer, 2006.
[91] Mollenhauer, 2006.
[92] Mollenhauer, 2006, p. 46, my translation.

children, we also present them in a new way – we *re*present them".[93] This is a non-reversal movement, leaving us with a major educational and theological question: *With increasing distance between the adult world and children's world, how is the actual world of the children constructed?*

Child theology and child philosophy are consequences of modernity, but the concepts have surfaced in late modernity. They presuppose a view of childhood as a separate arena of human life, combined with a more recent view of children as autonomous subjects with voices of their own – different from the adults, and yet on the same level in terms of rights and status. In many ways this modern view of the child owes its genesis to Christianity, but the connection between its religious roots and other roots is very blurry.

## 6.4. The child concept has changed in times of crisis

Historical analogies show another aspect that should be explored: New conceptualisations of the child developed in times of social, political and religious *crisis*. In our own time, a new focus on the child in the framework of *human rights* developed in the aftermath of World War II. The war demonstrated that it could no longer be taken for granted that the most vulnerable members of humanity are entitled to protection and care – major moral aspects of modernity had been shown to be too weak to counter modernity's bleaker side.[94]

Johann Amos Comenius (1592-1670) has been called the father of modern education. He travelled from place to place in Europe as a religious refugee, and his philosophy reflects an ardent sense of moral values that are necessary for the individual to navigate in a life of turmoil. Based on his thinking Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) developed his practical educational philosophy in a similar situation during the Napoleonic wars, and in that process he coined *human dignity* as a powerful concept. His

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[93] ibid., p. 48, my translation.
[94] Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has claimed that the atrocities of World War II were largely a result of modernity (Bauman, 1997).

purpose was to raise street children's awareness of themselves as human beings when exposed to de-humanizing social processes. Pestalozzi introduced a *child centred, relational practice*[95]:

> "Both teaching and household had to start in the relationship between the children and myself. (...) Principles and formative powers should be shaped by the higher spirit of the institution and the children's own harmonic attention and activity. The principles should grow from the children's situation, their needs and their social fellowship".

The present child paradigm owes much to Pestalozzi and his followers, but there is a big and important difference: Pestalozzi represented an early modernity where he envisaged a totality of life more like that of pre-modern cultures, supposing that children through sound education should be able to orient themselves in given spheres of life with God in the centre. In late modernity or in post-modern societies the structure of modernity's institutions no longer presupposes a stable totality. The gap between children's universe of meaning and that of former generations is widening. The ideal in Norwegian faith education of "total learning, learning in fellowship, learning through practice and learning in a natural context" is very open when there is no generally accepted cosmic totality. The concept "total" becomes *self-referential* – it refers to the individual as a totality, but not to the world as such. It remains to be seen how a natural context of faith education relates to other contexts of the life of children.

In a discussion of "post-modern faith" British educationalist Clive Erricker claims that faith "can only be understood within the matter of relationships, wholly immanent, not as the pursuit of some salvific goal".[96] I see his point if faith is understood in a context where there are no more meta-narratives, only small narratives. Erricker advocates a learning environment where children are stimulated to develop their own narratives, instead of reiterating supposedly correct views. My experiences with small children indicate,

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[95] in Mollenhauer, 2006, p. 67, my translation.
[96] Erricker, 2007, p. 58.

however, that children are not satisfied with that.[97] They search for something beyond their self-constructed – or inherited – worlds. It is difficult to claim that this search in general takes place in a time of crisis like those of the big wars, but the lack of meta-narratives is experienced as critical by many in times of social, economic and environmental stress.

## 6.5. The paradox of the new child paradigm

The new position of the child in society is, accordingly, a *paradox*. It should provide the best conditions for children to develop and grow physically, mentally, spiritually, morally and socially[98], but there is a *break in the flow of collective memory* that makes the backbone of a culture. Culture – including religious culture – is often perceived as a "set of ideas, values, norms and forms of communication that a group considers as its own, and that is received from the former generation and attempted transmitted to the next, somewhat changed".[99] The process of receiving and transmitting has become extremely demanding. The Danish bishop Jan Lindhardt says succinctly: "A cultural forgetfulness has spread. But not more than that we can well remember that there is something we have forgotten".[100]

Lindhardt represents a generation who were children in the 1950's, and came to reflect on forgotten culture at the end of the century. Children of today may not reflect on having forgotten something at all. The whole world seems to be at their disposal via electronic media. The question of formation – *Bildung* – becomes another than that of writing oneself into a shared culture. It has been claimed that children of today (and many grownups as well) should be understood as *cyborgs*, as we at all times are linked to a machine.[101] The cyborg in this post-modern sense is not a constant being, but a metaphor of *being-in-encounter*, of *interface*. The post-modern child

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[97] Sagberg, 2011.
[98] cf. the *Convention of the Rights of the Child, § 27.*
[99] Klausen, 1995, p. 24, my translation.
[100] Lindhardt, 1998, p. 10.
[101] Løvlie, 2003, p. 352, referring to Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs".

and young person *live in interface* with the whole world, and are formed as persons as they contribute to forming their world. *Or so it seems.* Contrary to what might be feared, it seems just as important as at the time of Pestalozzi to establish and maintain personal relationships, and maybe more so. Trajectories of cultural communication, including those pertaining to religious faith, have become more horizontal than vertical, but that does not eradicate that there is something we relate to in faith. This is a challenge to the parent generation to search for a theology that depends on *internal and spiritual qualities* rather than on *formal authority*.

Summing up, it may be claimed that the concept of the child is a *morally charged concept* in at least three senses. *First*, the fact of a specific declaration and convention of the rights of the child includes the child under the canopy of human rights, thus stating that *a human being has equal dignity and equal rights to a good life regardless of age. Second*, the negative side of children's rights is that *it is necessary to state them*; children are still actually made into objects of certain kinds of abuse, neglect, greed, or oppression. *Third*, viewing the concept of the child in terms of cultural transmission and tradition, and on the background of pre-modern, modern and late modern cultures, presents child theology with the task of *either bridging or exploring* the gap in our collective memory. Child theology takes on a strong moral challenge in making sense of the rights of the child, in working actively against oppressive practices, and in contributing to meaning-making processes. The third challenge requires special concern because of its ambiguity.

Modernity created a distance between the world of the child and the world of the adult, a distance that could be overcome only in personal relationships. Post-modernity has placed the child closer to the adult world in status, but institutional structures apparently make it difficult for children to be in continuity with older generations in their cultural projects. As a side effect, young people create culture more on their own. The result will, of course, increase cultural change, but the direction of change is unpredictable.

This has great impact on questions that used to be of vital importance in theology – questions of truth, of trust, of doing what is right. The outcome is still to be seen, and it is not certain that it will be negative. "Techno-cultural formation keeps concepts of humanity, justice and freedom, not as substantial and 'objective' values, but as questions and tasks", says educationalist Lars Løvlie.[102]

Exploring the cultural gap means that adults – including theologians – must pay attention to children's culture and youth culture and be ready to interpret their own faith in new ways. "Bridging the gap" may not be a living metaphor any more, as there often is no clear continuity to be seen. But there are *points of encounter*; the interface mode invites to make *mutual learning experiences*. This requires adults who are willing to explore and express their own faith not as something to be simply transferred, but as something that can be explored on a journey of faith where there are many young co-travellers.

## 6.6. The "identity" concept

At the Loccum conference in 2009 it was claimed that young people find themselves in an "identity vacuum"[103] - a vacuum due to political and social and cultural transition. That may be right, but what does it imply for the concept of identity? Search for identity has become increasingly important along with the loss of unifying frameworks in terms of worldviews, religious or ethnic and national adherence, resulting in extended uses of the concept (group identity, ethnic identity, role identity). The basic meaning of identity is "sameness". In terms of *personal identity* this unity has to do with an awareness of *being the same person in different situations and at different times*: "The crucial epistemological fact is that persons have, in memory, an access to their own past histories that is unlike the access they have to the

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[102] Løvlie, 2003, p. 371, my translation.
[103] Roebben, 2011, p. 21.

histories of other things (including other persons)".[104] A sense of personal identity means that "psychological continuity and physical continuity go together".[105]

An "identity vacuum" has a terrifying sound. If the access to one's own past history is denied or forgotten, and there is no identity marker to relate to in a meaningful way, it is very difficult to see one's direction in life. Some have tried to describe the late modern situation a little more optimistically in terms of "plural identity", as "the individual's choice among alternative identities, some more lasting and some more temporary".[106] Others claim that children (in the actual case, children of Muslim background in Germany) create *identity hierarchies,* like wearing hijab to express Muslim adherence while integrating other aspects of identity at a lower level.[107] However, a sense of continuity with oneself at other times and in other places as well as with one's environment, geographically and historically, is challenged both with a plural identity and with identity hierarchies.

It has also been claimed that young people today do not necessarily search for a stable identity, but live "permanently undecided" when it comes to questions of truth or morality. This may not necessarily be some kind of nihilism, but rather an awareness that life is lived in practice – the act of making an arrangement can happen in a moment, but then it is binding.[108] Løvlie's analysis reflects a large amount of research. However, it does not say whether young people are satisfied with living permanently undecided. Research on spirituality has many examples that show how important it is for children and young people to recognise their own selves in relation to other people and to ultimate reality, and how this process has positive transformative impact on their quality of life.[109]

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[104] Shoemaker, 1995.
[105] ibid.
[106] Skeie, 1998, p. 39.
[107] Müller, 2010.
[108] Løvlie, 2003, p. 368.
[109] De Souza, 2003, 2008.

Identity could be described as the process of writing oneself into a greater story – after all, we understand reality narratively or not at all.[110] It is therefore natural that narrative traditions often are rediscovered and rearticulated in times of cultural transition. An identity vacuum indicates that there is no place for your part of the story, or that there is no story to be found, and that is hard to deal with for both young and old.

The question of identity connected to changing concepts of the child indicates that there is a strong need to enter the process of meaning making together with children. This process is a matter of co-constructing cultural and spiritual frameworks – of writing new stories. The challenge for church education is to contribute to this process, allowing for work of God in the world of the child. Adults who abdicate from talking about their faith, fearing that they impose their views on the child, have not entered the arena of doing theology. Children will contribute to the new story of faith if they are given the chance to do so. In that process they may both discover truth in an existential sense and carry on the process of culture in better directions than those we have seen so far. But they should not be left alone in that task.

## 6.7. Child theology in Norway: trends and trajectories of research

I have claimed that children are agents of cultural change, but have to create culture in discontinuity with earlier culture. This makes the process of doing theology together with children very difficult, yet exciting. The power of child theology in this sense lies in the local, non-academic insight and the understanding of faith as practice. The weakness lies in a temptation to supplant one authoritative reading of texts and traditions with another, presupposing a specific child concept in the texts. This temptation is, however, inherent in all theology.

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[110] Bruner, 1997.

Authentic encounters and conversations with children in exploring faith and the actual sources of faith may be the only remedy against that temptation in any kind of child theology. The new faith education within Church of Norway is promising in that respect. There may be unresolved theological questions, but children are learning through faith practice in new ways. In an evaluation project the following results are observed[111]:

- Children have become visible in church.

- The child has become a symbol of hope and meaning. This is, of course, an ambiguous aspect in terms of both theology and of the child concept.

- The child in focus has renewed motherhood as important in faith. For example, in "baby singing" one ritual reads "I feel your skin touching my skin. So close is God as skin to skin, as the warmth from your cheek".

- Adults express faith through their children vicariously – but sometimes this leads to actual participation in faith practice and understanding in terms of faith.

- Children have affected the theology and practice of communion.

- Children have turned from being viewed as disturbing elements to necessary participants in worship.

These trends are possible trajectories of research as well. It is still debated whether child theology allows for viewing the child as a symbol of faith, showing "child characteristics" that any Christians should have[112], or whether such a theology would fortify certain concepts of the child that allows the adult to define the child according to the needs of the adult.[113] Different traditions of church education are influenced by the answers to that question. Further research on the significance of the child concept will have to deal with that issue, as well as with the question how child theology

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[111] Hegstad, Selbekk, & Aagedal, 2008, pp. 144-149.
[112] Sæbø, 2010.
[113] Johnsen, 2010.

relates to a sacramental grounding of education – in addition to several didactical issues of a socio-cultural pedagogy.

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Katharina Kammeyer and Elisabeth E. Schwarz[114]

# 7. "Why am I in this World?"

# Attitudes, Methods and Examples of Theologizing and Philosophizing with Children

This essay deals with experiences and reflections on learning with Theologizing and Philosophizing with children. Similarities and differences of the two approaches will be discussed – starting from concrete educational settings the necessary attitude, the role of asking questions, themes and goals will be discussed. The book „The Big Question" of Wolf Erlbruch[115] will be analysed from both perspectives, that of theologizing and philosophizing in education.

## *7.1. Starting point – theological and philosophical questions of children*

**Theological perspective:**
Preliminary to theologizing as well as philosophizing are observations in our classrooms like these: when children are learning about religious and philosophical themes, we see their activities in many ways. E.g. their discovery of time and the seasons and contemplating how each springtime trees blossom again at just the right moment. If they get the chance to plant their own seeds, they can watch them develop and document what they see. They encounter poems and stories concerning the topic, like the narrative of creation which tells that God named things to make them

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[114] This contribution aspires from the conference ""Powerful Learning Environments and Theologizing and Philosophizing with Children" in Kampen in April 2011 and is a form of dialogue between the theologian Katharina Kammeyer, who writes the theological parts, and the philosopher Elisabeth E. Schwarz, who writes the philosophical perspectives.
[115] Wolf Erlbruch: The Big Question. New York: Europe Editions 2005 is available in many translations.

appear in the world. They tell others about themselves, their plants and pets and they listen to their classmates' stories. Children also compare different creation narratives from various cultures, and within all these activities, they ask questions – not scientific ones, but also questions of philosophical and religious origin. Children discover God by means of asking questions and reflecting about it. For example like this when working with the first creation myth in class 4:

> "How old is God? How did those who wrote down the story of Adam and Eve know that these were their names? Why is the sun being created only on the forth day, while the light is being made already on the first? Why are there no children in the creation narrative? What will happen to the dead bird? Why doesn't God abolish war? Where would I be, if my parents had never met?"

Children also *interpret*, as to the first question:

> "God is older than everything because the world is so old already, and he was there even earlier. You realize that he feels old, I think. Maybe God would like to be young, and maybe he feels young when a baby is born. Can God remember his beginnings?"

'Theologizing' is an approach to Religious Education that appreciates and fosters the children's questions and their interpretation of the things in their life and their image of God. Such concrete and vivid questions of children, their speculating and interpreting of God, we call 'children's theology.' For thoughts like these are theological thoughts, and even grown-up theologians are challenged to revisit their understanding of the beginning and eternity, of the special kind of truth that applies to the biblical narratives, and even of the christological confession that God became a child on earth.

It becomes clear that faith and thinking are closely connected to each other. This has not changed since the days of St. Anselm of Canterbury. He expressed it like this:

> "I am not trying to scale your heights, Lord; my understanding is in no way equal to that. But I do long to understand your truth in some way, your truth which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand. For I also believe that "Unless I believe, I shall not understand."[116]

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[116] Anselm: Monologion and Proslogion with the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm. Translated, with Introduction and Notes, by Thomas Williams. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing 1996, 99.

For theology children are frequently models of trust, but we should also take them serious as models of thought, doubt, and questioning. You might say, combining the two will make creative, vivid and profound God-talk. It originates from trust and wonder, from the childhood's unique context of first-time experiences and focussing on relations, and from their proper concrete and real ways of thinking and expressing themselves. "Why are there no children in the creation narrative?"[117]

Thus, children's theology is, "a most specific way of God addressing the context of children. According to this definition, theology is realised in practical life, takes place in mutual contacts, and offers the experience of basic trust, attention and dependence."[118] This radical questioning and alienation, the interruption of the familiar actually enhances theology.[119]

Children definitely develop theology in Religious Education classes, however, it also happens in their everyday life shaped by their relationships, as well as by means of language and culture, nature, and quite frequently drawing on technical contexts. Deep thoughts arise from the early years, before school starts and they also come up without special religious information. Children are little philosophers, too. Children all around the world interpret death and life, for example when they find a dead blackbird:

> "The bird has ceased to live because its time was consumed. Like with a battery", such a little philosopher might say. "Now it is lying in the grave, but after seven days it will proceed to Heaven. God will allot it a place with a spy hole through the clouds." "I imagine there is a sun in Heaven, too...", a little girl theologian says.

It becomes obvious that both, elements of everyday life and religious elements, selected by the children, come together and are formed into constructions in their own right which are typical for a child. Children' theology, as well as children's philosophy, takes an interest in these

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[117] All citations of children are, when not mentioned otherwise, from the fourth grade of primary school, in which Katharina Kammeyer teaches RE.
[118] Angela Kunze-Beiküfner: Kindertheologie im Kontext des Kindergartens – Grundlagen und Praxisbeispiele. In: Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie 5, Stuttgart, Calwer 2006, 95-110, 98 (translated by the authors).
[119] See Wilfried Härle: Was haben Kinder in der Theologie verloren? Systematisch-theologische Überlegungen zum Projekt einer Kindertheologie. In: Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie 3, Stuttgart, Calwer 2004, 11-27.

independent constructions. Summing up for now, Ekkehard Martens' conclusion seems quite appropriate:

> "Both, children's philosophy and children's theology, with all their differences […] share aiming at reflecting experiences, propositions, and truth claims."[120]

**Philosophical perspective:**

Children's theology and children's philosophy share the attempt of recognising children as independent thinkers and having their opinions heard. They are encouraged to ask questions, to find their own words for inner ideas, even ones that are not exactly concrete, and share them amongst each other. Thinking sessions in children's philosophy have been conducted in various parts of Europe for about 30 years. The leading conviction was expressed already by Karl Jaspers: Children have direct access to existential, philosophical questions and create most independent answers, thus being philosophers.

> "A compiler could tell about a rich children's philosophy. Children often possess a congeniality that is lost in adult age. It is like entering a prison of conventions and opinions, of covering and not questioning things over the years, and thus we loose the naturalness of children. Children are still open in the state of self-producing life, they feel, see, and ask."[121]

In this case, philosophizing is not understood as a scientific occupation at university or ivory tower wool-gathering, but as thinking about the great questions of humanity which concerns each of us.

Jaspers identified the three human sensations which lead towards philosophizing: being amazed that the world exists and is wonderfully made, doubting whether the world really is, as it appears to us, and being concerned that the world is as it is, that is, unpredictable, final and full of suffering.

Especially in marvelling at the world and the incredible wonders of creation and in the concern about finality and suffering, children's philosophy and children's theology come very closely together. When children marvel,

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[120] Ekkehard Martens: Kinderphilosophie und Kindertheologie – Familienähnlichkeiten. In: Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie 4, Stuttgart, Calwer 2005, 12-28, 18 (translated by the authors).
[121] Karl Jaspers in, Hans Ludwig Freese: Kinder sind Philosophen. Weinheim, Beltz 1989, 43 (translated by the authors).

doubt, or are concerned, they ask questions. A lot of questions. Sometimes they only ask questions to confirm that their theories are sensible, and sometimes because they have not found an answer yet.

They ask minor and big questions; consequently, differences are made in thinking sessions in children's philosophy. Minor questions are in a sense easy to answer because there is a true answer, you just have to think or to look it up in a book or ask an expert. Big questions are difficult to answer, they allow for several answers, and each one has good reasons in its favour. Adult persons' philosophy distinguishes between what Heinz von Foerster calls discernible and indiscernible questions.[122] The indiscernible questions are those questions with which philosophy and theology mainly are occupied. Typical philosophical questions are:

> What if anything can I really know? What is truth? Why should one be moral? Is it permitted to lie? What makes for a successful life? What, essentially, is a human being? What was in the very beginning? What will be after death? What do I live for?

All these questions can be looked at from a theological perspective, too. Different philosophical schools and different religions provide different answers. As these questions are indiscernible, it is all the more important to give reasons for one's personal answer.


## 7.2. Attitudes of teachers and support of children by their teachers

**Philosophical perspective:**

Therefore, children's philosophy from its origin is considered to be thought training. A variety of methods have been created in recent decades to communicate more precisely. Terms are being defined more precisely, justifications are claimed again and again, logical reasoning is being trained, controversial discourse is being provoked. At the same time, children's

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[122] Heinz von Foerster: Teil der Welt. Fraktale einer Ethik oder Heinz von Foersters Tanz mit der Welt. Heidelberg, Carl-Auer 2002, 67 (translated by the authors).

philosophy is considered to be creativity training, for creativity is necessary to discover alternative points of view where there is more than one appropriate answer. Thus, it is not only about hard mental work, but also about finding creative and playful ways of expressing ideas. In the first philosophical thinking sessions, shyness of expressing oneself and asking questions must be reduced. All thoughts that come up are important, all questions that arise are welcome and permitted, however, not all questions can be answered easily. We can study this with an example from Eva Zoller, a children's philosopher from Switzerland.[123]

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Some primary school children had collected their minor and big questions and wrote them down on bigger or smaller clouds of coloured paper, according to their significance. Afterwards they were asked to state why they had classified their questions as minor or big ones.

"Why does the sky never end?" Aline thinks the question is minor, "because the earth is round, and there is sky all around it, so it never ends."

"When does a miracle occur?" Lena considers this to be a big question, "because … supposed I tell you now that it will happen tomorrow, we cannot be sure if it is true."

"Who created life?" Dennis argues, "This is a minor question because everyone knows God creates life."

Two of the children did not want to accept Dennis' opinion; they considered the question to be a big one, but they could not actually say why. The following discussion developed, skilfully lead by the children's philosopher:

Teacher (T): "Why might this be even big question?" (asking for reasons)

- "The Bible does not only tell really true things."

- "Perhaps somebody assisted."

- "I also think that somebody might have assisted."

T: "Assisted in making life, you mean?" (confirm whether it was correctly understood)

- "Yes, it is possible. Anyway, even if God had done it alone, it is a great question, isn't it?"

T: "Why do you think so?" (have propositions justified)

- "There are so many people in the world. God could not have made them all in the same time!"

- "It is impossible God snaps his fingers, and everything is there! So it must be a big question." ('logical' conclusion)

T: "Now I am looking forward to what Dennis thinks about your arguments."

-"Well, I think ... you are a bit right. I just thought that it is a minor question because it is obvious to everybody, isn't it?"

T: "Is that really true? Is it obvious to everyone?" (typical challenge)

- "Hmm... it depends."

T: "Now, it depends on what? Alina suggested that somebody might have assisted. Who might he or she have been?" (Examples are helpful for children. The subjunctive 'might' allows more space for assumptions)

- "No idea!"

- "Maybe Jesus?" (a child suggests an example)

- "That's the same as God!" (counter argument)

- "Right, however he is his son." (justification and correction)

The discussion goes on for a while. Eventually, Dennis states, "It is a minor and a big question at the same time!"

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[123] Eva Zoller: Selber denken macht schlau. Philosophieren mit Kindern und Jugendlichen. Kempten, Zytglogge 2010, 25 (translated by the authors).

The role of the facilitator is crucial here. In the example presented you find, that the teacher is reluctant with her own opinions and convictions, however, she inquires precisely in order to understand, calls for giving reasons, challenges to clarify terms and leads the discussion back to the subject.

In his discussion with Menon,[124] Socrates considered it crucial to act like a midwife: assisting every thought subconsciously present in a discussion partner's mind, to be given birth by asking questions skilfully. Children's philosophy has dealt a lot with the Socratic Dialogue(s) and was inspired by the 20th century "Neo-Socratic Dialogue" of Leonard Nelson and Gustav Heckmann.[125] They who wish to philosophize with children should, above all, learn the art of asking midwife questions, like:

- What exactly do you mean by that?
- Would you give an example?
- How does what you say relate to...?
- What are you presupposing here?
- Is it always like this?
- What are the reasons for what you claim?
- Are there reasons to doubt this?
- Who might know whether this opinion is true?
- What difference does it make?
- Does anybody have a different perspective on this?
- Could it be completely different?
- If this happens, what would follow?
- Why is this question important?
- Are we still sticking to our subject? …

Such midwife questions will intensify the children's dialogue, as is the aim of philosophizing. If possible, the facilitator will not introduce new ideas. She or

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[124] See Platon: Menon. Stuttgart, reclam 1994, 81e-86c.
[125] See Gustav Heckmann: Das sokratische Gespräch. Erfahrungen in philosophischen Hochschulseminaren. Braunschweig, Schroedel 1980.

he is eager to hear the ideas of the little philosophers and will listen very carefully!

> "They who wish to philosophize with children, must be ready to immerse in the realm of unsolved questions, must try to look at things assumed anew with the pure eyes of children. Their conviction that children are to be taken seriously as discussion partners is indispensable."[126]

In the end of the discussion the facilitator summarises the consensus found and which different chains of argumentation could be distinguished. The discussion ends without stating a definite result, however, it contributes to orientation and inspiration. When the facilitator is asked for her or his opinion, she or he will not answer as an expert in history of philosophy, but rather as a human being with existential experiences and her own points of view.

**Theological perspective:**

The basic attitude of theologizing is the same in many respects. Unbiased discussions, as well as moderate facilitating to enable balanced conversations, are central as well. Theologizing is also different in frequently setting the discussion topics in a powerful learning environment, maybe from the Bible, different theological positions, or elements from Christian feasts. For example, then children deal with the creation narratives and compose one themselves, like this:

> "... On the fourth day, God created goodness and friendship." "There were two children who looked for fruits in the garden every day. They had ample time, for each day was as long as they wanted."

We say, 'theology from children' is inspired by 'theology for children'. This is how the term 'theologizing with children' came to be. The German professor of Religious Education Petra Freudenberger-Lötz distinguishes three roles of the teacher: as observers, facilitators, and assisting experts. 1) Observer means to discern how children deal with theological topics (in everyday life or in open exercises during a lesson). 2) As a facilitator, the teacher helps to

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[126] Eva Zoller: Die kleinen Philosophen. Zürich: Orell-Füssli 1991, 7 (translated by the authors).

share the different points of view within the classroom. S/he systematises the interpretations shared and discussed by the children. 3) And s/he accompanies them as an expert by suggesting issues which build on the children's contributions. In order to do so s/he should be aware of theological relations to recognise details in the arguments, and also be aware of children's frequent approaches, for example, how they use figurative speech. The aim is having subjective interpretations and their inter-subjective discussion among the children and in the horizon of the Christian interpreting community.[127]

As to the children's attitude towards religious learning, I would call it a relational attitude, rather than a descriptive or comparative one. According to the former German professor of Religious Education Karl Ernst Nipkow, it is always allowed in Religious Education to ask this question: "What, or who, or how is God *for me*?" According to my observations, such openness for a relational attitude suits the attitude of many children. They share images of God acceptable or doubtful to them, but hardly ever any that do not touch them.

The relational attitude is complemented by the attitude of wonder, trust and of doubt. Thus, a child spontaneously reacted on the beginning of the Jonah narrative: "I didn't know that God can speak. He has never spoken to me. How can this happen?"[128] An attitude of faith is crucial, combined with the possibility to take a stance of further asking questions or disagreeing. The biblical stories offer these possibilities, for example the story of Moses. When it comes to understand the name of God, "I Am There", this story is open to different attitudes. The story tells how Moses and the people of Israel embark on a great journey out of slavery through the desert, and again and again they both trust and doubt if God accompanies them. Of course, they cannot *know*, whether God is really there. They believe it or

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[127] Petra Freudenberger-Lötz: Theologische Gespräche mit Kindern. Untersuchungen zur Professionalisierung Studierender und Anstöße zu forschendem Lernen im Religionsunterricht. Stuttgart, Calwer 2007, 223.
[128] See Petra Freudenberger-Lötz 2007, 15 (translated by the authors).

they live under the condition of *trusting this belief* – and at other times, the opposite is true. Consequently for theological conversations in our classrooms this means we need room to say: "I believe something…", or: as an experiment of thought, "I assume…" Or: "I can't really believe it, but supposed, this were possible, I would say..." Or: "Within the story I understand it like that…" "For me, it is similar/ different…"

Moreover, it is crucial to the proper attitude, that theologizing is not all about reflexivity, but also about acting and modelling of various roles, about creative writing, about art and music. A 'theological talk' needs these experiences and clarifications allowed in various stages of the process, and can bring them together and follow them up discursively.

Furthermore, your distinction between philosophizing and theologizing is important to me.

> "There are situations in a discussion where we have to decide whether the 'philosophical move of thought' or the 'theological one' is more adequate. The theological move of thoughts would indeed offer possible answers from the Christian faith when the children themselves would not give them. […] They who assist theological discussions should suggest images of hope – sometimes even from a counselling perspective […] in order to experience emotional security and significance. The art of theologizing with children particularly is about realising when and how..."[129]

## 7.3. Methods and Examples – "The Big Question" of Wolf Erlbruch in two perspectives

**Philosophical perspective:**

Now, how to philosophize, and how to theologize with children about Wolf Erlbruch's book, "The Big Question?" Being a children's philosopher, this book fascinates me for two reasons: in my opinion, it deals with the basic question behind all the "why" questions of little children. They do not inquire for the reasons, but they rather want to discover the significance of these phenomena. "Why are there serpents?" "Why is it raining today?" Probably, the following questions are in the background: "Does this make sense

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[129] Elisabeth E. Schwarz: Philosophieren – hat das was mit Religion zu tun? Eine Verhältnisbestimmung. In: Welt des Kindes 6/2007, 19-21, 21 (translated by the authors).

anyway?" "Is this world meaningful?" By asking much, children long for the confirmation that it makes sense to be in this world!

The question of this book, "Why am I in the world?", or, "For what reason am I in the world?" summarizes the many philosophical questions of children into one. Maybe this is why the book has been so successful in children's philosophy. Also, in every group of grown-ups I collect philosophical questions, I come across the question about the meaning of life. Camus called it the most urgent of all questions[130] and takes up the challenge to ask it under the presuppositions of atheism. Especially where there is no God, humans have to design themselves.

Thus, the present children's book can address a need of children, even if they have not been religiously socialised. Moreover, this book fascinates me because it encourages to find analogous examples. It aids faculty of speech, an important concern of children's philosophy. Moreover, it offers a lot of discussion opportunities. Now, how to work with it?
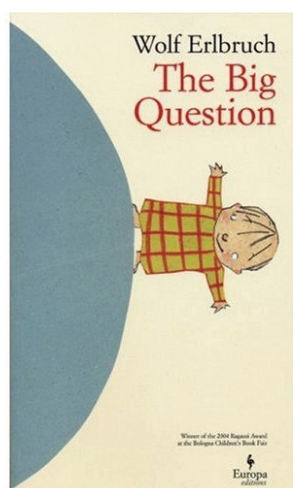


Maybe like this: first, the children are only shown the cover picture with the title: "The Big question". Which question might be asked in this book? What might it be about? Children formulate their ideas:

> "What, if I were alone in the world?"
> "How will I grow up?"

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[130] See Albert Camus: Der Mythos von Sisyphos. Hamburg, rowohlt 2000, Einleitung.

"Where do you want to travel?"  Etc.

When they are already able to write, their ideas can be noted down on pieces of paper and be grouped on the floor; thus processes to generalise – abstraction can be trained. Perhaps clusters of subjects become clear, for example, questions about the world, or questions about growing up.

An important element in philosophizing with children is deceleration. In a third step, even before the book will be read, the children could decide which of the questions found, should by all means be discussed at another time. These questions are put in a special treasure box introduced for this purpose. For exciting questions must not get lost. They are important, they make our lives richer.

Then, the book will be read. "The brother says, 'You are in the world to celebrate your birthday.'"

One sentence and one picture are visible on each double page. Everything looks quite large – as it is a very big question. "For purring you are in the world, at most for catching mice," the cat says. Among others, a pilot, a grandmother, a bird, a big man, and the number three give their answers, too. They all announce their expertise of life, according to their proper limitations. It is interesting to have a break when the duck answers. For it says, "I have no idea!"

What was the question? The children should formulate this themselves now. For this has not been disclosed up to this point. Experience tells that children soon find the question, "Why am I in the world?" Interestingly, precisely the duck having no idea at all, in another book of Wolf Erlbruch encounters death. Jointly look at these books – a recommendation of Eva Zoller for adolescents searching for their identity.[131]

After a few pages the children are able to continue drawing and writing the book. Some groups composed their own books by this exercise. Rainer

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[131] See Zoller 2010, 134f.

Oberthür,[132] in his project with primarily four pupils, asked to criticise the answers of the book one by one. Assessing the quality of answers, this is at the heart of philosophizing with children.

Why am I in the world?

| Answers | How do you like this answer? | Could it be your answer? |
|---|---|---|
| The brother answers: "You are in the world to celebrate your birthday" | 1  2  3  4  5 | 1  2  3  4  5 |
| The cat answers: "For purring you are in the world, at most for catching mice" | 1  2  3  4  5 | 1  2  3  4  5 |
| The duck answers: "I have no idea!" | 1  2  3  4  5 | 1  2  3  4  5 |
| …………… | …………… | |

Of course, the best way in philosophizing with children would be to talk together about a picture: Why is it death of all saying, "To love life you are in the world."? The seven year olds answer for example,

"Because life is better than death."
"Because all should be well, and you are happy."
"This is the most important in life."

Older children sometimes discover in philosophical discussions that life without death would be shallow. Only death makes life valuable.

Dealing with this book is worthwhile in philosophizing with children. A colleague said the children remembered it even many weeks later. In the school floors between the classroom and the Religious Education room she heard the seven years old quoting:

"To stop you I am here", says the balustrade.
"For being looked at we are here", say the work-pieces in the show cabinet.
"For making you rest I am here", says the bench.

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[132] Rainer Oberthür: Handout from a lecture at the University College of teacher training Wien/Krems in November 2010 (translated by the authors).

This pathway of significance was ended by the statement:

"'To talk about God you are here', says the Religious Education room."[133]

Certainly this book not only helps to define the significance of the Religious Education room, but it also will entice you, Katharina, to theologize about it.


**Theological perspective:**

From a theological point of view, I find this book very interesting for many reasons, too. I also see the 'what for' question having priority. Additionally, I have experienced that children also include the reason for our existence. Children in the first grade continued like this:

> "The football player says, You are in the world to score goals. The spaceman says, You are in the world to observe the planets. The skeleton says, You are in the world to frighten people. The lioness says, You are in the world to hunt. The apple says, You are in the world to eat apples. The craftsman says, You are in the world to repair things."

This is what they wrote about themselves:

> "I am in the world to ride horses, ... to know people, … to play, … to live, … to run, … to help God", and, four times, "... because God created me."

Even without an explicit writing task, "I am in the world in order to..." or, "... because...", children approach in both, double, thinking directions. Children who are some years older feel also invited to further contemplation and thinking. - Who 'is right'? Am I in the world because my parents love each other, or because God gave me life? How do the two interrelate? The question about who sustains my life leads towards 'double answers', too.

Both directions of answers, the 'where from' and the 'what for', help me to be confirmed about my self and the significance of my proper task. I realise that I find my own answers on significance not only when explicitly speaking about myself. I rather already take on the role of the gardener, or the spaceman, or the duck, or the football player; while making them express what their task in the world is, I consider whether their answers suit me. And

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[133] Irene Bünker: „Zum Über-Gott-reden bist du da", sagt das Klassenzimmer. In: Das Wort. Evangelische Beiträge zu Bildung und Unterricht. Nr.1/2005, 36f  (translated by the authors).

in Wolf Erlbruch's book this is a challenging point: all the people and animals say what is true for them – however they address me: they say: *you are in the world to…* - I get to know many possibilities, and my horizon broadens – maybe this is already a reason to be in the world. Yet, not every answer suits me. Apart from identification with others, setting boundaries and balancing are equally necessary. What do others think about me? According to the psychological perspective of George Herbert Mead, it is 'Me' asking this question. Now, the task is to balance 'Me' and 'I' with the aid of the proper view of 'I'. "'I' is permanently occupied with narrating the own life's story with 'Me' as the main character."[134] Consequently, working with this book, I would also create space for how children *perceive themselves*, for their various abilities and needs, for wishes, thoughts, dreams, and fears in them.

Each of us who want to accompany children in philosophizing and theologizing may ask oneself: how would you personally like to continue the book? What would your answer be, or in which role would you like to have the question answered? I am in the world … to find out what my task is … to leave traces … to find a person complementing me ... just to be there, as the stone says.

One of the questions I would ask for the discussion is: Is God actually missing in this book? Where may he be found? As the creator? As someone asking the question? As someone else the boy might ask? What would be God's answer? Whom would he ask? Will he tell me something about where from and where to? "You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (Ps 139:13f), the psalmist sings in Psalm 139. And what is God's will for my life? I can imagine that children answer quite practically: "Jesus would say, to eat cake with you, this is what he did together with Zacchaeus." Perhaps the children

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[134] Hans-Georg Ziebertz: Wozu religiöses Lernen? Religionsunterricht als Hilfe zur Identitätsbildung. In: Georg Hilger; Stephan Leimgruber; Hans-Georg Ziebertz: Religionsdidaktik. Ein Leitfaden für Studium, Ausbildung und Beruf. 6. Aufl. München, Kösel 2010, 142-154, 151 (translated by the authors).

know already some parables of the Kingdom. If so, they might use them for their benefit. Maybe they make God say, "that my people learn to know each other...". In this setting, the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount can be discussed – It is crucial not to worry, to pray, not to serve money (cf. Mt 6:24). If he asked Jesus, the little boy would certainly meet the task to love God, the neighbour and himself (Lev 19:18, Mk 12:29-31).

I especially like the book of Wolf Erlbruch because there are so many answers of love in it. There are expressive answers such as, "You are here to sing your song, to purr, just to be there...", and the functional ones, "get up early, fight...", but also many answers of love: "To love yourself", says the sister. "You are here because Mum and me love each other", says the father. "You are in the world to love life", says death. To celebrate life, "You are in the world to celebrate birthday", says the brother. "You are here because I love you", says the mother, not distinguishing explicitly 'why' and 'what for' any longer. In my class many children said, they especially appreciated the sister's answer "to love yourself". To love oneself and life itself - where does this lead the boy in the book? What does he eventually do after having received so many answers on love? What does he do after this journey? I suggest to follow up this question together with the children. Afterwards I would offer the commandment to love the neighbour and God as well as oneself as a divine answer, in order to think about what the boy might say or do in response. In our class children found many ways to express these kinds of love.

## *7.4. More questions and fields of theologizing and philosophizing*

**Theological perspective:**
With this approach, many subsequent topics to use the book for become evident: creation, death and life, identity, being different, love. Moreover, theologizing includes other fields of questions which Rainer Oberthür collected from primary school pupils, questions about the cosmos, about

justice and co-existence, about fear for the future and theodicy, about the origins of language, and the question about God (what can I know about him, does God exist anyway, how does God look like?).[135]

**Philosophical perspective:**

The educator Egle Säre from Estonia has offered philosophizing with children of various age brackets. In the Yearbook for Children's Theology 2010 she listed questions children liked in particular:

- Why are not all people rich?
- Contradiction and war
- What is lying?
- How did the world start?
- What essentially is a tree?
- What is time?
- Is there a God anyway?[136]

Based on Kant's four basic philosophical questions, the Professor of educational science Barbara Brüning suggests topics like these for primary pupils:

- Where do words come from?
- How do thoughts emerge?
- What means thinking?
- What is luck?
- How do I become a good friend?
- What is courage?
- What is justice?
- Wishes for a successful life
- Dreaming of a better world

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[135] See Rainer Oberthür: Kinder und die großen Fragen. München: Kösel 1995.
[136] See Säre Egle: Wie das Philosophieren in den Kindergarten kommt. In: Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie 9 Stuttgart: Calwer, 2010, 255-259.

- What makes me special?
- What do all humans have in common?[137]

At our university college in Vienna (KPH Wien/Krems) we were very successful with the topic "Being different – good or bad?".

## 7.5. Aims

**Philosophical perspective:**

There are many big, and many undecidable questions indeed. What is the aim of 'producing thoughts' about undecidable questions – wouldn't dealing with them eventually be a waste of time? At KPH Wien/Krems we argue for philosophizing with children as follows:

- To encourage asking questions shows children that life is questionable and fosters an intrinsic motivation to think, to seek, and to research.
- To encourage children to marvel can bring about awe and respect for the own life and that of others.
- To encourage independent thinking and decision making promotes personality development, particularly prevention of material and mental drugs and violence of any kind. It fosters discussion skills, tolerance, acceptance, an understanding of democracy and the ability to deal with conflict. In this respect, philosophizing as a search for meaning with mind and heart is understood as school of life.
- To foster the ability to argue and to express oneself serves to acquire basic competencies and thus contributes to basic education.[138]

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[137] See Brüning, Barbara: Philosophieren in der Grundschule. Berlin: Cornelsen, 2001.
[138] See the curriculum of the training course: „Theologisieren und Philosophieren mit Kindern und Jugendlichen". Lehrgang der Kirchlichen Pädagogischen Hochschule Wien, 2009, 2f.

**Theological perspective:**

Once more, the aims of theologizing are quite similar. I would like to add, the big question, "Why, or what for am I in the world?" points to a certain aim. Sure, the question of life cannot and must not be solved or answered. However, issues that children deal with or that make them worry will be offered a certain orientation. Thus, theologizing cultivates a language that opens up categories as well as hopes. Its aim is to consider life under the horizon of God's Heaven and to pursue God's traces in this world. Doing so, a *reflective discourse* shall be developed, the children will be active in thinking and opening up in matters of faith, they will reflect on themselves, and topics will be followed up ambitiously. Children shall be enabled to talk about God, themselves and their environment self-confident and well informed. The eloquence of the children should be enhanced as well their competence to be critical towards fundamentalist tendencies that they may encounter. Through theological discussions they learn that a simple worldview without alternatives will not be adequate to describe reality. Rather *complementary descriptions* occur and can be employed by them: one can praise the world being God's creation and at another time the same person reckon it as a product of stardust. - This aim is a big and difficult one, but nevertheless it is a crucial one in our society dominated by the rhetoric of natural science and economy. Coming to terms with each other about common ground and differences in non-violent relationships is particularly necessary when people from different religious backgrounds and without a religious confession live together.

Gerhard Büttner

# 8. Narratives as Powerful Media in Philosophising and Theologising with Children

Why do we theologise and philosophise with children? Why do we tell them stories? These are the central questions of any kind of pedagogic action. From my point of view the German pedagogue Hartmut von Hentig has provided us with two important imperatives as an answer to these questions in the title of a small collection of essays: "Die Menschen stärken, die Sachen klären" ("Strengthen people, clarify things"). I would like to reverse this order in my examination – at first we ought to reflect how we can "clarify things" in philosophical and theological discourse with the help of stories. Von Hentig deliberately sees his programme in the sense of an elucidation. If we "clarify things", they become "clearer"; we are able to understand them and in thinking further we can discover new things or understand the old things more fully.

However, the second demand is not less important. If we are able to understand the things surrounding us better, we will uncover the truth about the more or less subconscious threads which direct our actions. We will thereby realise how much we are "interwoven with stories"[139] and become able to gain a perspective on how to continue with the help of this or another story. Agreeing with Hentig, I assume that these processes can indeed "strengthen people".

## *8.1. Clarify things – From the action to the narrative*

In the Platonic dialogue "Protagoras", the sophist Protagoras asks Socrates how he should conduct his argument – "by telling a story or by going

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[139] Schapp 2004.

through an argument?" When the audience expresses its indifference, he claims that "it is more graceful to tell you a story".[140]

Two modes of arguing are juxtaposed by Plato in this dialogue – deductive reasoning and storytelling. Nevertheless, he lets Protagoras explain that telling a story is more enjoyable.

That is why I would like to begin with a story as well. Gareth Matthews[141], who specialises in the philosophy of children, tells us that he treats his cat with a remedy against fleas while his four-year-old daughter is watching. She would like to know more about the origin of the fleas. The father suggests that other cats are a possible cause for the infection of their own cat. But this only means a shift of the question for the curious daughter: "Where do the fleas of the other cats come from?" When the father suggests other cats again, the daughter is convinced that it will always go on this way which normally only occurs when dealing with numbers.

We are impressed with this story because of the encounter with an intelligent child and a father who responds to his daughter's questioning in a sensitive way. He will presumably soon realise that there is a deeper sense to the daughter's questions because he knows himself that this is a case of the so-called *infinite regress* – an important figure of thought in the history of philosophy. But before I explain this in detail, I would like to bring the characteristics of a narrative more generally into question.

A man applies flea powder to his cat. Although this is an action, it is not a narrative yet. The daughter's question turns the action into the beginning of a narrative because she asks about what was *before*. Hence, the story of a cat that has caught fleas through the contact with other cats is at least implicitly told. As this is highly inconvenient, the owner relieves his cat of the nuisance and hopes that thereby the story is over (at least for the moment). If the event has once been translated into the scheme of a narrative, sequels, forwards as well as backwards, are always possible. In our case

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[140] Plato 1996, 320/p. 180.
[141] Matthews 1994, 1 ff.

the daughter has discovered another characteristic of this mode: An endless continuation is theoretically possible. If this discovery has once been made, it is most probable that it will lead to the question of the absolute beginning (or perhaps ending as well). Mathews has certainly realised that in asking questions about the absolute beginning his daughter has posed one of the "big questions" of philosophy. The *infinite regress* leads to the question of the beginning: the first cause or the unmoved mover. Already Aristotle considered this as the basis for a proof of the existence of God. Mathews does not employ this knowledge in this particular moment, but it is obvious that we find a perfect starting point for philosophising and theologising in this situation.

## 8.2. The question of the beginning

I would like to use the question of the beginning as a starting point for further considerations. If a Christian theologian (in this case the same applies to a Jewish or a Muslim theologian) is asked what answer one should give a child concerning the question of the beginning, he will reply with the *creatio ex nihilo*. God has created the world from nothing. Although we can assume that intelligent men (or intelligent women) will be able to offer explanations and quotations from the Scriptures, they will not succeed in silencing curious children with them. They will realise that the logic behind the *infinite regress* is not satisfied with these answers because the question remains: *"Who has created God?"* Theology will reject this question through a specific definition of God; however this fails to satisfy all philosophic questioning. The second yet more virulent request is uttered by the theories of physics which describe the very beginning as the "big bang". Already this title suggests a colloquial offer of an interpretation in which highly complex thoughts are concealed. What children and most adults consider as "big bang" is usually less sophisticated than the model of the priestly creation narrative (Gen 1,1).

But these stories of genesis do not aim at describing a process covering millions of years in a brief and coherent way. They are rather pursuing the "big question" of *why something is as it is*. This is how the countless myths of creation of various peoples explain why it rains, why we have a certain staple diet, which meanings we attach to certain animals and much more. Evolutionary theory is able to illuminate many processes this way, but usually not their existential meaning for me as an individual. I would like to demonstrate this phenomenon with the help of the narrative of Aristophanes in Plato's "Symposium".[142]

> Aristophanes explains why people in love say they feel "whole" when they have found their beloved partner. It is, he says, because in primal times people had doubled bodies, with faces and limbs turned away from one another. As somewhat spherical creatures wheeled around, Zeus cut apart these bodies. Ever since that time, people roam the world saying they are looking for their other half because they are really trying to recover their primal nature.

Although it may be impossible to find biological proof for this story, the painful and sensual process of finding the right counterpart should be well known to everybody. Aristophanes has lent the necessary complexity to his model, thus it is also able to explain same-sex love. Once again a founding narrative serves as a speculative interpretation of today's phenomena. Moreover, I have to mention that it contains an implicit invitation to discuss whether the story must or should always remain the same.

Hence, an important feature of these narratives becomes clear, as they virtually contain an implicit instruction for deconstruction in their construction plan. The consequences of this for founding narratives have been most accurately shown by Jörg Schubriger who has created a number of founding narratives himself. In his eponymous story "Als die Welt noch jung war" ("When the world was still young") he writes[143]:

> Back then when the world was still young there were not yet any people. There was no need to milk the cows and to feed the chickens. Somehow the animals got

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[142] Plato 1993, 189-193/p. 18ff.
[143] Schubriger 1996, 9f.

along by themselves. It took a long time. The world was wide and wild. One day, however, the first human being, a woman, appeared. She glanced around. "This is not bad at all", she said. Then she closely examined the objects around her. "A good idea, these trees", she remarked under a green beech tree. The cows and the chickens made sense as well. "Good idea, these animals; they give milk, they give eggs and they can be eaten, too". She grabbed a milking stool and sat down underneath a cow to milk it. Where did the milking stool come from? She had brought it along. So did she have luggage? Only the milking stool and a hand full of chicken feed. Did it exist where she came from? How else could the woman have brought it along? So where was she from? From elsewhere. And how had she arrived at this foreign land? She had always been there. Listen, how am I supposed to know that? You can tell the story if you want!

At this point a new attempt at narration begins within the same story, which from my point of view shows the nature of these founding narrative; they seek to clarify certain circumstances. But in doing so, they always have to create preconditions that cannot be referred to in the attempt at narrating itself. A famous example is the biblical story of paradise (Gen 2,4). In paradise everything is good and well ordered. But where does the serpent come from? According to Schubriger, one could assume that it comes from "elsewhere", yet this is not a solution. It renders the narrative inconsistent and thus shows that the origin of evil is inexplicable.

If we agree with the constructivist theoretician von Foerster, who claimed that "insoluble questions" form the core of philosophy and theology, we can consider the different narratives as attempts at finding an answer. As no final answer exists, it is necessary to find or to invent new stories.

This means for practical philosophising that for logical reasons we should offer several stories to choose from. In speaking about their preferences for one story, children make a decision they will have to explain. Instead of choosing narratives, it is more consequential to compose our own stories which would be the most creative form of philosophising.

## 8.3. How to continue? Theologising with biblical stories

When I was in first grade, we moved into a house that had previously been owned by a painter. There I found a bundle of papers with pictures showing

scenes from the bible. I remember being most interested in the pictures of Jesus. I was driven by a special question which unfortunately my parents as well as my grandparents remained unable to answer: Which of these pictures depicts Jesus *after resurrection*? I assume that I was touched by a question which must be posed by every reader of the gospel of Luke as well. Although Luke tells us the story of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus and afterwards mentions a meeting of Jesus with all disciples, his narration then quickly arrives at the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. In Acts of the Apostles 1,2 we get to know that Jesus remained *on earth for forty days after his resurrection* before ascending into heaven. Already the pericope Luke 24,36 is marked by the question in which condition the risen Jesus has to be imagined. Just as he had suddenly *disappeared* in the story of the meeting on the road to Emmaus, he now *reappears* among the disciples, who think he is a ghost. Although he shows them his wounds and eats with them, this does not answer my childlike question of where he had lived and stayed in the meantime. As an adult theologian one knows that these questions go beyond Luke's text. But strictly speaking, Luke has himself evoked this question in introducing – unlike all other evangelists – a separate Ascension into heaven which is fixed in time. But in examining the childhood question more closely, it does not prove unlucky at all. On the contrary, it leads towards the open question of how we can and should imagine Jesus in his change from godly to human nature. While theologians can rely on the confession of Chalcedon in this situation – "truly God *and* truly man" – this will only be successful in a conversation with children if several aspects are linked with concrete stories. Consequently, my central thesis is:

Whenever new questions arise, new stories have been told.

Let us now examine the gospel of Mark. It begins with Jesus' appearance prior to his baptism and ends with the message of the angel before his resurrection. This structure of the plot literally provokes questions: What was before and what was afterwards? I have already tackled the question of

what was before – thus merely mentioning the nativity stories of Mathew and Luke has to be sufficient for now. I would rather like to treat the mechanism which characterizes the *preceding stories* in detail. All the other evangelists are not satisfied with the message of the resurrection of Jesus. They tell us how Jesus encounters different men and women from the closer and wider circle of disciples. Nevertheless, they respect the last secret of *how*. Yet it is clear that this could not end any further questioning, as in the preserved fragment of the apocryphal gospel of Peter it is explained how resurrection took place:

> It is described here how heaven opens (IX, 36) and how two figures descend, enter the grave and reappear with a third figure while a cross is following them (39).[144]

This passage was integrated into medieval depictions of the risen Jesus with the cross. The formation of legends, which continued until the Middle Ages, has to be understood as several new attempts at answering unsolved questions. But these attempts at the parallel formation of dogmas have to be distinguished from each other, as they are simultaneously further constructions and deconstructions which challenged new constructions. It is thus adequate to search for or to invent new stories with children. Rainer Oberthür, for instance, mentions a parable of Jesus which was created by one of his pupils[145]:

> Once the disciples said to Jesus: "You have told us a lot about God, just tell us once something about the kingdom of heaven". Accordingly Jesus spoke: "Once there was a mother who was full of concerns. Her three-year-old son had a severe flu and the doctor anticipated that the child would die soon. Nevertheless, she did not give up. The boy was supposed to spend the last days of his life as pleasantly as possible. But one day the doctor said that the boy was much better and two weeks later he had recovered completely. I told you this story because I want you to realise that love is stronger than death." With this remark Jesus ended his story and everybody understood that the mother's immense care for her child equals the kingdom of heaven.

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[144] Vgl. Wikipedia Art. Petrus Evangelium.
[145] Oberthür 1996, 161.

This story is undoubtedly a masterpiece of children's theology. It shows that in principle children are capable of developing stories of a specific genre. This is how Petra Pohlmann was able to show that pupils can write their own miracle stories if they have understood the structure of a miracle story. She used a simplified scheme of motifs which has been established by the New Testament biblical scholar Gerd Theißen: dangerous situation – appearance of the miracle worker – call for help – help – acclamation. Different stories may be developed on the basis of this scheme. Although these stories can differ in theology, they can be based on the same cognitive framework. Employing the same principle, it is of course also possible to invent one's own Platonic dialogues.

In adhering to the chronology of the stories of a certain gospel, already children are able to discover the developments and tensions between the single pericopes. They start to develop a feel for differences and nuances and discover that theological truths are always formulated from a certain perspective. Especially the biblical authors seemed to be quite aware of the fact that manifold descriptions of the same situation can create confusion if obvious differences are inherent in them. Nevertheless, the differences were normally not eliminated; that is why already children are able to reflect why significant changes can sometimes be found within the synoptic parallels or why distinct differences exist within the two creation narratives in the book of Genesis.

So far I have only examined narratives with regard to their structure and their literary context. I have deliberately not yet mentioned any methods because I would like to point out that whoever comes into contact with stories will more or less automatically be led to ways of dealing with them, as I have shown above. The question of an "objective truth" proves inappropriate whenever a story is retold. A shift of nuances will certainly occur because every narrator has a different attitude of questioning and

thus a different perspective. It is nevertheless possible to employ the inner dynamics of these narratives in a more or less profitable way through the choice of an adequate method. Methods, like creative writing, enactments, "bibliolog" or "bibliodrama", help use the possibilities of these narratives in the best way for philosophising and theologising.

## 8.4. Strengthen people – narratives as opportunities for identification

A primary school teacher told me the following story a couple of years ago:

> The pupils in my form reenact a scene from the story of Joseph. Joseph stands in a line with other prisoners and follows a caravan which should bring him to Egypt. The children stand in a line as well articulating their woes: "I would like to go home to my father!" In this situation a boy begins to weep bitterly.
> It turns out that his parents have separated recently and the mere thought of his absent father has made him cry.

This little scene shows that stories apparently do not only set off in depth reflection, but they also evoke feelings and memories. They are obviously a medium in which important experiences of life-history can be concentrated. This does not come as a surprise for Religious Education, as many approaches have pointed out that it is inappropriate to deal with the pupils' questions and problems in an explicit way. It is better to create an opportunity for identification with the help of "indirect media"[146], such as the verses of a psalm.[147] The child can thus articulate things it is currently moved by in the role of a biblical person. Elements of "bibliolog" or the "bibliodrama" support this approach. That is why we can expect stories to have a therapeutic function in the broadest sense.

I will now continue this thought in a more fundamental way. In the meantime, different scientific approaches have become interested in this function of narratives – from psychology and philosophy to theology. I would

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[146] Brockmann 1978.
[147] Baldermann 1986.

like to begin with some observations of psychology. The German psychotherapist Hans Dieckmann observed that a majority of his patients had a favourite fairy tale. This particular fairy tale is of high diagnostic value, as in most cases the structure of the fairy tale indicates the problem. If it states "a father had two sons", the missing mother immediately attracts the attention. This does not necessarily mean that the patient's mother is also absent in reality, but apparently she is missing in the perception of the unconscious. The course of events in the fairy tale or its ending also frequently give hints as where to search for a solution to the patient's problems. The American psychiatrist Eric Berne most interestingly comes to a similar conclusion in his "transactional analysis". He claims that people's lives are frequently determined by a script they unconsciously follow. His terminology for these scripts often originates in the world of fairy tales as well.

This observation is ambivalent if we assume that it is desirable to organise a somewhat self-determined life. But according to the quoted studies, it is just not the case that we *consciously* choose a main direction for our lives. It is in fact the unconscious that chooses the corresponding script. Consequently, responsible pedagogic action can only consist of offering an adequate selection of stories that the unconscious can make use of. I would like to show how this could happen with reference to a children's book which has attempted to transfer the story of the prodigal son into the living environment of children. In "Lukas haut ab"[148] ("Lukas runs away"), scenes of discontent, illegitimate enrichment, enthusiasm for wasting money, loneliness and of a happy return home can be found. Thus, identification is possible at several points of the story. However, the plot of the story ensures no orientation on what is morally desirable. But what characterises a good narrative? The fairy tales I mentioned above are said to have an archetypal character as well as mostly a "happy ending". The former means that primal human experiences have become integrated into fairy tales; that

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[148] Wegenast & Baltscheit 1997.

is why they are highly appropriate for the depiction of fundamental experiences such as a child's detachment from the parents. The happy ending indicates the fundamental openness of life and the existence of various solutions.

If we examine biblical narratives in this respect, it becomes clear that many of them display similar features as the fairy tales I mentioned above. Many pictures have become defining beyond the Christian cosmos: David and Goliath, Job, the Good Samaritan and many parables and miracle stories of Jesus. They also offer – as already shown in the parable of the prodigal son – opportunities for connection and identification and usually have a positive ending. Consequently, Tanja Schmidt quite rightly argues that the pupils ought to have access to a variety of these stories – as a selection they can draw upon depending on the situation. She underlines the substantiality of these narratives in contrast with commercial narratives.

In the first part of this article I have drawn attention to the fact that every single story is constructed in order to be continued or modified. Hence, theologising and philosophising usually takes place with a range of stories. A connoisseur of a Platonic dialogue can interpret other dialogues with reference to it. A connoisseur of one of Jesus' miracle stories can compare it with another. According to Ricoeur, dealing with such stories can lead to habituation in the original sense of the word. One becomes the inhabitant of a cosmos of stories. Petra Freudenberger-Lötz has shown what happens to pupils if they discover such a world of stories over a longer period of time. Just like the characters in a novel by the Dutch author Maarten t'Hart who conduct a conversation through the medium of profound knowledge of the bible, the children refer to biblical stories in their discussions and relate them to each other. Can Jesus be scared like a normal person and cry in one story? And can he appear as a God and do deeds no other person is able to do in another? Freudenberger-Lötz argues that questions of this kind are the cruxes of theologising. With reference to these experiences one last comment on the so-called "narrative ethics" has to be made. How do we

make ethical decisions? What is good and what is evil in a specific situation? Most decisions we have to make are fortunately not decisions about death, life, peace and war. In these cases lengthy discussions might be inevitable. But what if I do not have the right change for the underground or if I am in a hurry when someone needs my help? A good argument can be made that in situations of this kind the updated scenes of known narratives strike us like lightening and help to direct our decisions.

The Zurich ethicist Johannes Fischer speaks about "the narrative deep structures of the reality of life inherent in biblical and Christian tradition which govern Christian life and conduct".[149] He exemplifies this by referring to Luke 10,33 and Matthew 25,35. The importance of the parable of the Good Samaritan must indeed not be underestimated as even to the present day it determines the question of whether one is ready to help or not in a specific situation and influences the fact that the denial of assistance is a statutory offence in many countries. The second passage Fischer names is the parable of the Last Judgement, containing the message that in every needy person we encounter Jesus Christ himself. This passage from the bible impressively manifests itself in the legend of the Saint Martin of Tours, which is already known to every child in nursery school and celebrated every year with processions on November 11.

We can thus see that narratives do not only serve as scripts for the constitution of our individual identity, but also as foundation of our collective identity.

## 8.5. Conclusion

If we talk about philosophising and theologising with children we have to take both poles into consideration, which means that we should care about the well-being and the education of our children, but that we also have a certain responsibility towards philosophy and theology. Although it may be

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[149] Fischer 2007, 243.

sensible and adequate in didactics to consider how and in which situation philosophical and theological thoughts can be implemented, these thoughts have to be preserved in their original quality. Moreover the children have to be sensitised to the fact that these thoughts still have intrinsic values, even where the children might disagree with them. Nevertheless, important findings of philosophy and theology are not too abstract or too complex to be comprehended by a child. On the contrary, I have to underline the narrative characteristics of the most important and memorable findings. I'm thinking for instance of Plato's Allegory of the Cave or of Nietzsche's man with the lantern who is looking for God. These narratives are certainly not simple, but it is possible to comprehend them easily at the first attempt and discover new dimensions with every new approach without ever arriving at an end. Therefore I would finally like to quote another "big question" and present the narrative answers to it.[150] Martin Luther came to the conclusion that the most profound question which separated him from the Catholic Church was whether one could become religious of one's own accord. He supported the counterintuitive theory according to which this is impossible and faith can only be initiated by God. This topic of "free will" was also taken up again in modern brain research. Luther denied the concept of the free will because only this way could he be sure that God's merciful acts were crucial and humans could not contribute anything to their soul's health at all that was not first given to them by God. His smart opponent Desiderius Erasmus disagreed with him, stating that humans could at least contribute small things and thus have a – highly restricted – free will. If one assumed the contrary, every plea to do a good deed and not to do evil would be impossible.

I cannot go into details about this topic – but I can point out that older children are highly interested in it, for instance concerning the question: "Is God a puppeteer?" Instead I would like to present two short parables Luther and Erasmus have based their arguments on:

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[150] Büttner & Thierfelder 2002.

Erasmus claims that human-beings are like a child that starts toddling. The child sees an apple at some distance which it tries to reach. But it does not succeed by itself. It has to be supported empathetically by an adult, but – and this is what matters highly to Erasmus – it also has a share if it succeeds in reaching the apple.

Luther tells us a different story: He argues that we humans are such a thing as an animal used for riding, but that it is crucial who rides the animal, God or the devil.

Pupils who were told both stories were able to follow Luther's argument moderately well. They noticed – as well as Luther did – that this dramatic fight of riders for the riding animal only applies to the question of faith. It does however not apply to the, in this respect neutral question, as to whether I should buy the washing powder of a brand A or a brand B; if this picture does not apply "then", as was remarked by one little girl, "then the horse is in the stable".

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Friedhelm Kraft & Hanna Roose

# 9. Adventure Christology. Children and Young People Discover Jesus as Christ

## 9.1. Some examples of the content of the workshop

The workshop started with an introduction to the concept of "Theologizing with children". Modern pedagogy views children as competent beings who are interested in "crucial questions" (Rainer Oberthür) which we cannot answer objectively. Children need chances to discuss these questions, they need information and alternative answers to elaborate their own answers. The concept of "Theologizing with Children" classifies these answers as "theology".

With reference to Jesus Christ, the concept can be spelled out as follows: Children need to learn about Jesus, the Galilee, the Jew from Nazareth, and his (moral) teaching ("Jesu-ology"). They also need to learn about Jesus, the Christ, Son of God, who – according to Christian belief – is still among us (Christology). Christology necessarily includes "crucial questions". It coins our image of God and of ourselves. In many German RE-classes, there is a certain imbalance between "Jesu-ology" and Christology. There is much talk about Jesus from Nazareth, but too little room for thinking and talking about Christ, the Risen Son of God. The basic idea of our project "advantage Christology" is to improve the balance between both aspects.

We presented 5 lessons centered on Christology. Whoever asks about the relevance of Jesus' message, considers at the same time him- or herself as addressee of that message. Fourth grade pupils are capable of distinguishing between the past and the present, but the difference between "historical Jesus" and "resurrected Christ" is unknown to them. They form their "Christology" with regard to the present. This activity requires free space, space in which they are given the chance to form their thoughts and

images in creative activity. Therefore, the pupils are pivotal to didactic planning.

The first lesson dealt with different images of Jesus Christ. We wanted to know what kind of ideas and thoughts had been developed by the pupils during the teaching time of four years in Religious Education. Pupils differ in their approach to Jesus Christ. In order to reflect this diversity, we presented different pictures of Christ from the Arts. The pupils were asked to select some images ("In my view, he is similar to …") and to write a short text about the question: "What is special about Jesus?"

In the second lesson the pupils were confronted with the biblical story on the announcement of Jesus' birth and his baptism. Both stories speak of Jesus as the "son" of God. They represent in an exemplary manner the special calling of Jesus and his close relationship to God. The stories are meant to trigger a "theological" conversation that is concerned with the uniqueness of Jesus and with a deepening reflection on this question with regard to the biblical texts. The children discussed why children are being baptized, how children are given their name and how Jesus received his name.

The third lesson with the title "Jesus 'opens' eyes" dealt with the word "I am the light of the world." The "I-am-word" served as a hermeneutical key to the interpretation of the miracle story of the healing of a blind man (John 9). The children were asked to write their own story "around" the "I-am-word".

The fourth lesson was focused on the Emmaus story, especially to the verse: "Then, finally, their eyes opened up. However, at the same moment he was not there anymore." (Luke 24.31). This verse refers to a new experience of reality. In this narrative Jesus "opens" eyes as well. But in this case the encounter with Jesus is a reference to the resurrected Jesus. It is a narrative that challenges our habits of vision. Can reality be perceived in different ways? How do children handle different perceptions of reality? The goal was to encourage the understanding that reality can be experienced in multi-dimensional ways. Christological thinking takes place within the tension between the past and the present. (How) Can Jesus Christ still "be

present"? We worked with flip-images and asked the pupils to develop some ideas as to how Jesus Christ can be present today.

In the final lesson the pupils discussed the cross. They compared two different versions of the symbol of the cross: a crucifix and a Life cross from Latin America and considered which cross they would put in a church. Afterwards they created their own cross and wrote a text on the topic "the meaning of my cross".

## 9.2. Summary of reactions

The participants were very interested in the different materials and ideas we presented. The discussion evolved around two aspects. On the one hand, we talked about certain materials and methods we employed: How did they work, what did the children say, what needed to be changed? On the other hand, the participants discussed our central idea, i.e. the need to give Christological questions more weight in RE lessons. This main thesis was widely agreed upon and we compared the teachers' experiences with teaching "Jesus Christ" to our own ideas and suggestions. Here the recurring question was: (How) Do Dutch RE pupils differ from German ones? One teacher offered to employ our material in her class and give a short report on how it worked with "her" children.

## 9.3. Conclusion

The workshop was successful in encouraging teachers to give Christological questions more room. We were surprised to find that the need to do so was widely accepted among the teachers.

Henk Kuindersma

# 10. Poems and Songs & Theologizing with Children.

# Examples out of Practices

## *10.1. Introduction*

Two quotes were the starting point of the workshop:

'The greatest job on earth: being a religious educator who philosophizes and theologizes with children, and who is not afraid, neither of raising difficult 'slow' questions, nor presenting 'slow food' (Bert Roebben).[151]

'You cannot philosophize with children and theologize with children out of the blue. You need a powerful learning environment' (Johan Valstar).[152]

Storytelling in Religious Education is the most common approach to give substance to the learning environment. In religious communication all over the world, stories, poems and songs are equally important. Through their language and images, poems and songs touch hearts and minds and they express meanings in a surprising way.

Children benefit from songs and poems; they invent songs and poems by themselves.

Altogether these are convincing motives to enrich the learning environment with poems and songs.

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[151] Bert Roebben, Children's Theology: Concepts and Context, Problems and Horizons. In: Friedhelm Kraft, Hanna Roose, Gerhard Büttner (Eds.), *Symetrical Philosphy and Theology in Classrooms across Europe*, Rehburg-Loccum 20011, 11.

[152] Johan Valstar use to mention this statement in his presentations and workshops.

## 10.2. David's dance

The first example comes out of a school class in the middle of the Netherlands. The pupils are nine or ten years old. Mrs Cecile, their teacher, tells them the story of King David and the Ark (2 Samuel 6: 12-23). The story deals with the festive procession in which the ark is brought to Jerusalem. The people celebrate the procession with all kinds of musical instruments. As 2 Samuel 6 repeatedly mentions, King David dances 'before the Lord' in a short linen ephod. He dances and leaps 'before the Lord'. Michal, his wife, despises him. Not because he is worshipping the Lord, but because he humiliates himself in front of the people. After the story, children learn a German song about King David and the ark which has been translated into Dutch.

| 'Die Bundeslade' (German) | 'De Ark van het Verbond' (Dutch) |
|---|---|
| 1. Seht dort die Menge, hört den Gesang!<br>Schaut doch den prächtigen Wagen.<br>Pauken und Schellen, Tambourinklang!<br>Jeder stimmt ein ohne Zagen.<br><br>Refrain:<br>Die Bundeslade zieht herein,<br>drum sing' und tanze Gross und Klein<br>und preise Gott den Herrn! Er ist uns<br>nicht mehr fern!<br><br>2. David, der König, führet sie an,<br>David, der tanzt mit den Knechten,<br>jubelt und singt so laut wie er kann,<br>dankt seinem Herrn, dem Gerechten.<br>Refrain:<br><br>3. Gott will ich spielen, der mich erwählt,<br>der mich zum Fürsten erhoben!<br>Gott, der uns alle schützt und erhält -<br>kann man Gott königlich loben?<br><br>Die Bundeslade zieht herein,<br>vor ihr wird jeder König klein:<br>vor meinem Herrn und Gott<br>wird Stolz und Macht zu Spott." | 1. Zie al die mensen, hoor hun gezang,<br>kijk wat een prachtige wagen!<br>Trommels en bellen; ieder brengt dank,<br>zingt op de maat van de slagen:<br><br>Refrein:<br>2. Hier komt de ark van het Verbond,<br>zingt met elkaar en danst in het rond<br>en roep nu keer op keer:<br>'Dichtbij is God de Heer!'<br><br>2. Kijk, Koning David zelf voert hen aan,<br>danst met de mannen en de vrouwen,<br>jubelt en zingt zo luid hij kan,<br>dankt zo zijn Heer, de getrouwe:<br>Refrein:<br>3. Zou ik niet God, die ooit voor mij koos<br>en mij tot vorst heeft verheven,<br>die ons bewaart en die voor ons zorgt –<br>dansend de koningskroon geven?<br>Refrein: |
| | |

## 10.3. Theologizing with children

The children enthusiastically learn the song with instruments. They like the song which functions as 'an incentive'[153] for the theological conversation afterwards.

> "Who sings this song?" asks Mrs Cecile.
> "King David!" the children answer in chorus.
> "Is it not strange what King David does?"
> "No. King David is happy. Therefore he is dancing." says a girl.
> "But he pulls off his outer garments," notes the teacher. "That's weird!"
> A boy wearing a football shirt yells out: "That is not strange.
> If footballers have scored a goal, they are also happy and they pull off their shirts!"
> Other children nod. They all understand King David.
> "Nearby is our Lord!" the people sing along with King David. How can that be?"
> "The ark shows that the Lord is nearby!" answers a boy.
> Everybody agrees.

## 10.4. What is an angel?

The second example also comes out of a school class in the middle of the Netherlands. The pupils are ten to eleven years old. They are already familiar with the subject area of angels in the context of Christmas. This topic is of great interest to the children as it raises the important question as to whether angels really exist.

Mrs Gryt, their teacher, focuses on the latter question in a 'roundtable-talk'. The children are very motivated to undertake an investigation into the existence of angels. They are expecting an interesting lesson as their teacher usually manages to combine both funny and serious elements in

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[153] An incentive is a stimulus that fires up a particular emotion / action, as if by magic' (Johan Valstar en Kuindersma, *Verwonderen en ontdekken*, 2007, 120.

her approach to topics. And that is also the case in this lesson. Mrs Gryt gives them a special poem to read:

| **Angel** (English) | **Engel** (Dutch) |
| --- | --- |
| I believe I have seen an angel. | Ik geloof dat ik een engel heb gezien. |
| I'm obviously not sure. | Ik weet het natuurlijk niet zeker. |
| You never know with angels. | Dat weet je nooit met engelen. |
| | |
| He wore a blue coat, grey trousers | Hij droeg een blauwe jas, een grijze |
| And old shoes without laces. | broek |
| He asked for money: one euro and fifty | En oude schoenen zonder veters. |
| cents | Hij vroeg om geld: een euro, vijftig cent |
| to pay for a place to sleep, he said. | om het slaaphuis te betalen, zei hij. |
| | |
| But nobody believed him. | Maar niemand geloofde hem. |
| Except that girl with the red boots and the | Behalve dat meisje met die rode laarzen |
| dog. | en die hond. |
| But she was also an angel, | Maar dat was natuurlijk ook een engel, |
| as she said. | dat zag je zo. |
| That girl, I mean, not that dog. | Dat meisje bedoel ik, niet die hond. |
| Or well ahead, | Of nou vooruit, |
| that dog, | die hond ook, |
| why not? | waarom niet? |
| | |
| Bette Westera | Bette Westera |
| | |
| In: Gerrit Kombrij, *De Nederlandse Kinderpoëzie In 1000 en enige gedichten, (Dutch Children's Poetry in 1000 and some more poems*). Amsterdam 2008, 886. | In: Gerrit Kombrij,*De Nederlandse Kinderpoëzie In 1000 en enige gedichten*, Amsterdam 2008, 886. |

## *10.5. Theologizing with children*

The teacher says: "What do you think of this poem? Say it in one word."
She writes the following comments of the children on the whiteboard:

Nice

Strange

Funny

Weird

Nonsense

Strange, but beautiful

Okay

Crazy

Fake

Stupid

The children discuss what they have said and it is written down on the whiteboard. And they soon agree - the poem is threefold: nice, strange and funny.

Then Mrs Gryt gives the children another task: draw the three figures in the poem - the beggar, the girl and the dog - and draw an angel. The children see each other's drawings which initiate an intense conversation. The figures and angels look so different! Especially the beggar, the dog and the angel. The beggar is drawn very differently in terms of size, dressed very differently and has different facial expressions: friendly, stern, sad. The dog has all sizes. But all children draw him like a sweet animal. The angels actually all look very similar: friendly creatures with wings. However, two boys draw their angels without wings, which causes a great discussion: "Angels do have wings!". This is at least the opinion of the vast majority of the children.

And Mrs Gryt? She says nothing. She only moderates the communication between the children.

After the children have spoken about each other's work, she gives them a text to read about angels:

**Angels**

Angels come to you regularly in Bible stories. The word *angel* comes from a foreign word. From the Greek word *angelos*. And that word means messenger. There came an angel of God to Mary to tell her that she was to be the mother of Jesus. And so, three men, who are called angels to Abraham to say that he and Sarah would have a baby. But angels do even more. After the ascension of Jesus and after Pentecost disciples spoke of Jesus in the temple. They were imprisoned. An angel freed them. The Bible also says that you can encounter angels without knowing it. In all these stories it is not said what the angels looked like. Only a prophet, the prophet Isaiah says, that he saw angels with six wings.

After reading the piece of information about the angels she asks the children: "Read the poem *Angel* by Bette Westera again. According to Bette Westera, all three figures are angels. What do you think?"

All the children want to give an answer. Some examples:

> Janna: "I do not know. Perhaps it may be true."
> Ilse: "That may be so, I think. But because they have other clothes on."
> Tonke: "I do not think angels look like humans. But it could be."
> Jente: "I also sometimes give a dollar to a bum. And then I am an angel. So it is, really."
> Kim: "Yeah that girl. Because she is nice. She gave money to the bum."
> Lubbert: "You cannot read how an angel looks like. So it may be."

The question remains: Can angels really exist?

The children all fully agree: Everywhere you come across people who tell glad tidings. Throughout, one can come across people who help others - they at least seem to appear as angels. Just like the girl in the poem, however the question as to whether there are beings directly from God remains open - it could be true.

## 10.6. Discussion

The workshop participants all considered songs and poems of great importance for the religious communication with children. They had already made extensive use of songs and poems, but not for theologizing with children. After the workshop, they were convinced of the additional value of both songs and poems.

Despite appreciation for the playful approach some participants noted: "Ark and angel belong to the religious language. These concepts are distant concepts for today's children. Children can really imagine anything if they are confronted with the concepts of ark and angel. Can they really relate content and meaning to it?"

Others say: "Religious Education is the right place for children to encounter concepts like ark and angel. It helps them to explore content and meaning."

Anton Vandeursen

## 11. Doing Philosophy with Children

Doing philosophy with children as a method in education is a combination of thinking together and creating extra space for individual thinking. In all those childish heads different scenes take place, deviating thoughts are being formed. Talking together about thinking, about the vagaries of language, means the making visible of all those individual figments and try to make head or tail of them with each other. Distinguish bright ideas from silly whims. However, it is not always clear beforehand what is wise and what nonsense is. That being the result of investigating each other's thoughts together.

By learning language children discover at an early age the great opportunities of language and thinking. Without going in too great detail about the exact relationship between thinking and speaking, it is evident that learning to speak has a tremendous impact on our thinking. Even now too little is known about it, although off late much interesting research into the mental development of children is being done.

The best experiential practice still is holding conversations with young children yourself, with pedagogical and facetious thoughts being frozen for a while. Children are the first who increase the space for imagination and who are able to step up the play between fiction and reality to a great height. It is the three-year olds who make adults eat a so-called mud pie. They have mastered that game at an early age already.

What is doing philosophy with children?

We concentrate on the meaning of two concepts: The Possible (possibility) and the Real (reality).

Let me start with an anecdote that Einstein was once told:

> "On the beach there was a boy, about five-year old, trying to make flat stones skim over the water. I thought he did not make much of it. With the typical meddlesomeness of adults I took a flat stone and demonstrated how it should be done. I thought that I had done quite well. For on maybe twenty points where the stone had touched the water, circles formed on the surface. The boy had watched me politely and with benevolence, and when the ripples had gone again, he looked at me and said: Yes, round circles I have been able to make for a long time, now I am trying square ones. Einstein had to laugh loudly and said: give him my regards, and tell him that he should not worry, even though he will not succeed; most important is that he hit upon the idea of the **possibility**."[154]

The last line '… the most important thing is that he hit upon the idea of the possibility.' Einstein could also have said: '… most important is that he used his power of imagination.'

Now what does the philosophizing with children have to do with imagination, power of imagination, with what is possible?

Now what is the relation between doing philosophy and possibility?

Children as it were have an inherent spontaneity to try out behavior time and again, they do so to explore and arrange their environment. An important expression of behavior is asking questions, such as:

- Who has lit up the sun?
- Who has thought up the world?
- How do things get their name?

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[154] Hein 1989.

- How come stars give light?

These questions of children can then roughly be divided into two kinds, viz.:

| Reality questions | Possibility questions |
|---|---|
| Eg,.: | |
| <ul><li>How come stars give light?</li><li>Why is half of 8 a four?</li><li>When was Napoleon born?</li><li>Why is it not raining just now?</li></ul> | <ul><li>Can you stop thinking?</li><li>Will I always stay the same I, or will I be someone else in 10 years?</li><li>Can something disappear just like that?</li><li>How come I am I?</li></ul> |

Reality questions are questions where you can expect an answer to, and when we have an answer, we also know that it is an answer (true or false does not matter).

Sometimes you have to wait long for an answer, because you have to think intensively or have to collect much knowledge. For these questions there are basically empirical and analytical decision procedures.

To a possibility question like: 'Why do I live?' it cannot be indicated clearly what answer I now wish to formulate. Do I ask after my aim in life or after the reason for or the meaning of it? We first have to go and think about the question to exactly know what I actually ask. What we actually do is exploring a number of possible answers. These questions are notorious for their inherent vagueness and for the fact that there are no decision procedures to lay them down or answer them once and for all.

It is striking that children, especially young children, in order to organize their environment or to orient themselves in it, ask questions exploring the possible. They do not only explore the world in a moral sense, but also ask questions challenging (the power of) imagination. Do think of questions likes:

- Can you see the time?
- How do the stars get their name?
- Are you someone else when you have had another name?

These questions explore the world within the scope of its possibilities. Young children play with those possibilities and continuously explore what concepts are applicable to that world.

"It is just philosophy that shows us how our world is hanging in the web of possible worlds. We understand the world, because we can see her differently because we can also see other worlds."[155]

In doing philosophy with children we try to maintain and develop this capacity of children to see new and unusual connections. Philosophy is not only arguing, but speculating too.

Doing philosophy with children is thinking together, without referring to philosophical traditions. It is the searching for backgrounds, the tracing of motivations why something was thought or said, the making explicit of intuitions, the keeping open of the possible.

The above short paper on doing philosophy with children is realized in the Netherlands in education within the wider scope of discussion on the aims

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[155] van der Leeuw 1989.

of doing philosophy with children and doing philosophy as a new subject at primary school.

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K, van der Leeuw, 1991, *Filosoferen is een soort wereldverkenning* (Doing philosophy is a kind of world exploration), Tilburg 1991, p.75.

Pieter Vos

# 12. Discovering the Virtue in Moral Formation and Religious Education

Moral formation can be seen as a long lasting process embodying a positive task to develop a moral character in a person. This task is an end in itself and not necessarily an effective or efficient means for realizing other ends. Therefore, moral formation must be regarded as an important pedagogical task of education itself and not as an externally imposed obligation. Furthermore, moral formation is not limited to the cognitive and rational development of a person, but also has as its end, the property of a marked development of personal attitudes and skills, including moral passions and emotions.[156] In this respect, it is remarkable that Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive theory of moral development[157] has played such an important role in moral formation and education, including Religious Education.

In the workshop 'Discovering the virtues', an alternative to Kohlberg's cognitive approach was presented: a virtue ethical approach to moral formation in (religious) education. Other than Kohlberg's theory, virtue ethics states that moral formation is not only a matter of developing the capacity of moral reasoning (in borderline cases), but also the formation of the moral self into a virtuous character. The stress is on the formation of the moral self. Moral formation requires a comprehensive process of education in being moral, in which both autonomous judgment and habituation, both reasoning and moral praxis, both attitudinal character and keen insight into moral situations are developed.

The workshop intended to disclose some of the rich sources of virtue ethics which are not been fully appreciated in practices of formation and Religious Education, especially in the protestant tradition. Also from a religious

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[156] Vos, 2006.
[157] Kohlberg, 1981.

educational perspective a virtue ethical approach seems appropriate. Virtue theory is, after all, an ethics of the good life, and religion has something to do with a comprehensive view of what a good life is.

## 12.1. What is a virtue?

After these preliminary remarks, in the workshop attention was paid to the question what a virtue actually is. Well known is that virtue ethics finds its origin in classical antiquity, ending up in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics being its supreme form. His description of virtue is still the standard in moral philosophy. One of his formula says: 'Virtue is a state of character, disposed toward action by deliberate choice, being at the mean relative to us, and defined by reason and as a prudent man would define it. It is a mean between two vices, one by excess and the other by deficiency; and while some of the vices exceed while the others are deficient in what is right in feelings and actions, virtue finds and chooses the mean. Thus, according to its substance (…) virtue is a mean, but with respect to the highest good and to excellence, it is an optimum'.[158] It proofed to be helpful to understand certain properties of this definition.

(1) In Aristotle's definition, a virtue is, first of all, to be regarded as a state of *character*, or *habitus* in Latin, acquired through experience and habit. Applied in today's context we could say that  virtue ethics does not as such concern what you are allowed to do or not (norms), neither primarily with the ideals you are striving for (values), but it is aimed at developing states of character (virtues), e.g. dispositions that bring about that one becomes inclined to conduct oneself in certain ways. But virtues are more than just dispositions. Virtues do not only equip us for certain activities, they also influence how we perceive and describe the activities in which we engage and how we respond to situations and other people. That's why we could

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[158] Aristotle, 1975, p. 29, with some changes in this translation, see Ethica Nicomachea, 1107a 1-6.

call them traits of character. They become part of our attitude. If such a trait is good we call it a virtue, if it is bad, we call it a vice.

(2) Secondly, these character traits *determine our actions and our choices*. They are much more constant than individual actions. They do not only determine what I will do, but also how I will respond to the situation in which I find myself, even how I will perceive this situation.[159] We mostly make our choices at the basis of dispositions or character traits, often not being aware of this. If I am a negligent person I do not have much regularity in my life: one moment I will do this and the other moment something else. But this irregularity also shows a pattern which reveals my character, although we are used to call negligence a vice. How do we determine what the right, e.g. the *virtuous* pattern is?

(3) Virtue has been considered to be a quality *lying in a mean* (*to meson*). For, according to Aristotle, virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, in which there is excess, deficiency, and an intermediate.[160] Virtue is a mean between two vices. The standard example is the virtue of courage. Somebody who is courageous does not keep the mean between some courage and a lot of courage, but he keeps the mean between being afraid of danger (vice 1) and not being afraid of danger at all (vice 2). The first vice we call being a coward (a vice by deficiency), the second vice being reckless or rash (a vice by excess); courage in the virtue approach of Aristotle is then the perfect mean between these two, e.g. the virtue as a mean enables you to give an appropriate response in a given situation.

(4) But to understand what the mean is we will have to realize that virtue is always an *optimum* as well, which means: the best possible quality. A virtue is not moderate, but an excellence. Regarded this way most virtues can be

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[159] Van Tongeren, 2007.
[160] Aristotle, 1975, p. 28 (1106b 16).

described as character traits in which a certain natural emotion or passion finds its best shape.[161]

(5) Aristotle states that the *mean is relative to us*, which does not imply relativism, but indicates that a virtue does not mean the same thing for everybody at any moment. Virtues are qualities which make it possible to do the right thing at the right time, etc., but it is not possible to say for once and for all what the mean, e.g. the right way of reacting is. But how, then, can one determine the mean in a given situation? Practical reason, *phronèsis* or prudence, is needed. To know what is prudent and reasonable in a situation, we have to pay attention to two things: 1) the aim or *telos* and 2) the circumstances. Paying attention to the aim means that you wonder: what is the good or final end on which the performance in that practice is aimed? And paying attention to the circumstances means that you wonder if your reaction is right in this specific situation.

(6) A second rule of thumb to determine the right attitude entails finding the mean by *watching good examples*, that is, prudent people ('the prudent man' in Aristotle's definition). What would a person whom we consider to be excellently prudent, courageous, patient, magnanimous, righteous etc., do? The good example is a criterion and at the same time by watching it shows us the way by which we learn to keep the mean ourselves.[162]

(7) Aristotle holds that virtues gain their meanings in the perspective of the end (*telos*). This highest good of human life is 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*). According to him, happiness consists in the realization of the best human opportunities in a certain form of life, which coincides with life as a citizen in the town state or *polis*. One could say that the virtues fit us to live a life characteristic of flourishing human beings.[163]

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[161] Aristotle, 1975, p. 28 (1106b 17-23).
[162] Van Tongeren, 2007.
[163] Meilaender, 1984, p. 11.

## 12.2. Virtue ethics in the Christian tradition

Though virtue ethics is of antique Greek origin, it also forms a constitutive part of Christian ethics in early Christianity. A fundamental correction brought about by Christianity is the introduction of the idea of radical evil and the meaning of the will. The Church Father Augustine emphasizes the radical nature of evil and in doing so he corrects the optimism found in Greek virtue ethics. For it is the will which should be aimed at the highest good, but in reality it often turns out to be an evil will. This means that moral formation is not only aimed at the mind and the education of passions, as this is the case with the Greeks, but also at the education of the will for it to develop into a good will. Such is not something that man can strive for himself, but it is the working of grace in one's life.

Whereas Augustine emphasizes that the virtues are a matter of grace, many centuries later Thomas Aquinas emphasizes the natural capacity of man to be virtuous, be it that this capacity is created by God in human nature. The Reformation broke with the Thomist scheme of nature and grace and the distinction between natural and theological virtues resulting from this. Although this criticism did not prevent the Reformers from speaking in a positive way about virtues, in the end Protestant ethics developed more and more into an ethics of obligation.[164] According to Gerald Strauss[165], Protestant educators had difficulties with linking the idea that only God could turn the individual's heart on the one side, with their own educational efforts to inculcate virtues on the other.

## 12.3. Implications and good practices

Finally, the implications of a virtue ethical approach for the practice of moral and religious education were presented and discussed. Good practices

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[164] Vos, 2011.
[165] cited by Meilaender, 1984, p. 123.

were derived from two recently published books (in Dutch) on virtues in educational practice, respectively for secondary and elementary schools.[166] Some conclusions:

(1) A virtue-ethical approach of moral education does not aim first of all at the education of the student but of the teacher. Generally speaking, "examples are better than precepts." Teachers should therefore in the first place learn to reflect on themselves. This can be done, for example, by asking oneself what a truly exemplary teacher is like, and what in all kinds of moral situations would be the right, that is to say the optimal reaction.

(2) The daily pedagogical interaction between teacher and student is important. Moral formation should be integrated in education as a whole, rather than being only the subject of specific lessons in ethics or Religious Education, and rather than taking the form of discussions on moral dilemmas. This does not exclude lessons (and Religious Education has important contributions to offer in this respect), but most important are the unplanned moral situations which can become 'golden moments,' in which more may be learned than in a whole series of lessons. A teacher must have the pedagogical ability to respond adequately to questions regarding virtuous acts.

(3) The strength of the virtue-ethical approach is that it is connected with motivations which already exist. The question of a modern ethics of obligation is: *what do I have to do?* The question of virtue-ethics is: *how do I want to be?* This is a question which children and young people are strongly occupied with. It is also a normative issue within the framework of a Christian view of humankind. A virtue ethical approach appeals to the intrinsic motivation of students, as does good education in general – namely

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[166] Van der Meulen, Vos & Van der Jagt 2010; Van der Jagt & Vos 2010.

to challenge them to make connections between what they are good at with how they would like to be.

(4) Because of this it is important that the school is a community where teachers and students know each other. Schools which form a community must strive for a situation in which teachers, students, supporting staff and parents feel connected and know that they are appreciated.

In conclusion, if we want to adopt a virtue ethical approach to moral education in our schools we must think of it in terms of gradual formation, start with ourselves as teachers, and realize that the education of a virtuous person takes place in community.

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## Beiträge zur Kinder- und Jugendtheologie

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This volume contains the contributions for an international meeting of pedagogues in Religious Education in Europe. These pedagogues came together on 4 to 7 April, 2011 for a conference entitled *Powerful Learning Environments & Theologizing and Philosophizing with Children* at the Protestant Theological University in Kampen, the Netherlands. The program included two main, intriguing questions:

What do we mean by the concept of a powerful learning environment?

What is the meaning of powerful learning environments for the practices of theologizing and philosophizing with children?

These questions were at first discussed in presentations dealing with the following topics:

The didactic preconditions and elements for teaching Religious Education from the perspective of a powerful learning environment

Examples of 'good' subject materials – stories, artefacts, textbooks, films and so on – to stimulate philosophizing and theologizing with children

Secondly, the concept and the meaning of powerful learning environments for theologizing and philosophizing with children in the practices of school and church were discussed on 7 April during the open conference day. A hundred and thirty interested people, experts and practitioners from the Netherlands and Belgium not only attended two inspiring performances about the state of the art of philosophizing and theologizing with children in Europe, but also visited various workshops afterwards.

The collected contributions in this volume provide a meaningful insight into an inspiring conference and invite anyone who is interested in children's theology to continue thinking about the two central questions of the conference.