

Aims and Orientations for Religious Education in the 21st Century – A Theological Perspective

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Religious education has developed into a highly demanded subject. In recent years the insight has increased that pedagogical efforts are significant for the future of the Christian faith – especially within the context of multi-religious society. Religious socialisation, the process of growing up within a Christian context and getting in touch naturally with forms of expressing faith play a formative role, whether or not people define themselves as Christians. This is not surprising in itself, as belief is an approach to the world and a basic life-orientation which is established in childhood and youth. Conversions to Christianity during adulthood are naturally possible, but they rather form an exception than a rule. This circumstance provides reason enough to acknowledge the significance of religious education in general.

It is, however, less obvious how these efforts in religious education are to be shaped and how their meaning and aim are to be described. What exactly do we want to achieve and when can we regard the efforts of religious education to be successful? What is guiding us within the different areas of religious education? The questions are particularly significant regarding religious education at school. The subject “religious education” forms part of the general educational mandate of the schools, and as such is subject to religious neutrality in Germany as well as Denmark.

1. Object or Subject? Looking backwards

The discipline “religious education” has dealt with these basic didactical issues since its establishment at the end of the 19th century. The research of religious education in the 20th century can be categorised by the answers given to the question of duties and intentions of religious education. Many of these lines of discussion can be summed up as the opposite of “object” and “subject”: Should the focus lie on the “object” of religious education at school and during confirmation class, and therefore on the content of faith, or should people and their various questions and needs be at the centre? In Germany the question was debated most fiercely in the 1970ies. For the elder generation of theologians – influenced by the so-called “Dialectical Theology” – the focus of religious education was on the *content* of Christian faith, especially on the Bible and catechism. In their opinion, Christian faith needed to be expressed clearly without being diluted by human topics or religious needs. The younger generation of theologians in this time however reacted to empirical studies regarding religious education as out of touch with real life, neglecting the pupils’ concerns. They wanted to put the *subjects* in the foreground and align religious education with the

questions and concerns of the pupils. A major controversy followed during the following years. A significant article contributing to this debate published in Germany is titled “Muss die Bibel im Mittelpunkt des Religionsunterrichts stehen?”¹ (= “Does the Bible have to be the Focus of Religious Studies?”) . The author, Bernhard Kaufmann answers this question with a clear “no”. For him, religious studies have to focus on the issues of the pupils at school – or at least on what teachers considered to be their issues. Biblical narratives only play a role in so far as he considered them helpful for answering questions concerning the pupils’ living environment. Kaufmann’s concept is known as “problem-oriented religious education”.

In the 1980ies, however, certain Christian traditions and especially the bible were re-discovered for religious education. For instance, within the German theological context developed the so-called “biblical didactics”.² This concept acknowledges that the language of the Bible, especially of the Psalms, reflects the fears and hopes of the children and teenagers and enables them to express their religious needs. After the phase of differentiation the insight grew that the alternatives of “object or subject” miss the point. Subsequently equal emphasis was placed on content and people, on the Bible and children in religious education. As such, religious education does not solely concern either the content or the person, but both equally.³ This realisation, which in my opinion is essential, should by now form the consensus in religious education. However, further development in religious education has shown that this formula, which appears to be a “golden compromise”, does not solve the problem satisfyingly. To clarify precisely aims and orientation of religious education, it is apparently insufficient to simply avoid pitting content and subjects against each other, as both need to be taken into account equally.

The fact that the relationship between content and subject is still disputed will be demonstrated on the one hand regarding the current situation of religious education, and on the other regarding the newest conceptual considerations.

First, the situation of religious education will be examined.

¹ Bernhard Kaufmann: Muß die Bibel im Mittelpunkt des Religionsunterrichts stehen? Auf dem Weg zum Religionsunterricht im Lebenskontext und Dialog, in: K.-E. Nipkow / F. Schweitzer (ed.), Religionspädagogik. Texte zur evangelischen Erziehungs- und Bildungsverantwortung II/2: 20. Jahrhundert (TB 89), 182-188.

² Cf. Ingo Baldermann, Einführung in die biblische Didaktik, Darmstadt 1996

³ Cf. as one for the first authors Klaus Wegenast: Bibeldidaktik 1975-1985. Ein Überblick, JRP 3 (1986), 127-152, 130.

2. Between common religiousness and Christian tradition – the situation of religious education

The situation of religious education is probably complex in all European countries, as it is influenced by various factors that differ in each country. A central aspect, at least in Germany, and as far as I know in Denmark as well, seems to be the tension between common religiousness and Christian tradition. Herein the opposition between subject and object appears in a new light. I call the two extremes, between religious education is taking place “subjective religion” and “objective religion”. They can be defined as follows:⁴

- “Subjective religion” refers to personal religiousness of individuals, and is not necessarily attached to an institution. It is also not necessarily Christian. This diffuse religious dimension is issue of religious education and is accepted as such by those involved.
- “Objective religion”, on the other hand, refers to constructed forms of religion which people encounter on the outside such as biblical texts or forms of church and liturgy. “Objective religion” is associated with religious education formed on the basis of Christian traditions and conscious of a specific position.

“Subjective religion” is the subject of religious education because the personal involvement and religiousness of the pupils need to be taken seriously. Religious education should not only provide information, but help the pupils to ask religious questions, find answers for themselves and develop their own religious identity. It is no longer possible to presuppose a natural Christian socialisation of the pupils. On the contrary, one has to expect various levels of knowledge and heterogenous religiousness: accordingly, school reflects the religious plurality of society. On the one hand, various religious communities exist beside the Christian churches. On the other hand, a diffuse religiousness can be encountered that adopts and assimilates various pieces of religion, often combining them (syncretism). Nowadays people define themselves as authority concerning which religious content they adopt and where their orientation lies. The essential question is whether the religious content matches personal experience and convictions and can offer support regarding vital issues. The present religiousness is consistently put in relation to the individual way of and coping with life. This leads to a wide understanding of religion surpassing the content of Christian tradition.

From the point of view of educational theory the orientation according to the (often diffuse) religiousness of these subjects can hardly be avoided. The process of education cannot be understood as distant information about objects. The individual is engaged in these objects not only on a cognitive level, but with all dimensions of personhood. This applies to any process of education, hence particularly “religion” cannot be learned in a distant mode

⁴ Cf. Uta Pohl-Patalong: Räume für Religion. Kirche und Schule im Kontext religiöser Pluralität, PTh 97, 2008, 186-205.

as it addresses the innermost depth of the individual. Consequently, religious education also has to incorporate “subjective religion” for reasons of educational theory.

At the same time, religious education in Germany and Denmark, at least in the Folkeskole, is still shaped by Christian faith and the corresponding confessional creed (in protestant religious education in Germany this refers to the content and the teachers, while simultaneously being open towards all pupils). Subsequently religious education refers to “objective religion”. On the one hand, the theory of religion provides a reason for not defining religious education as neutral in terms of religion: The model of religious education which ignores religious denomination, as is sometimes demanded in Germany, does not appear appropriate regarding the object. “Religion in itself” or a general religion of humankind does not exist. Such a construct blurs the background of certain religious creeds and opinions, and most importantly it does not reach the depth of the subject that religion actually aims at. From this point of view, mere information about religion appears similarly absurd as physical education without children moving. Religion is always connected to inner participation, personal involvement and identification, which in turn is only possible in forms of tangible and thus objective religion.

In the context of the social development mentioned above, which in Germany is additionally challenged by the increase in Islamic religious education, the Christian profile is at present emphasised and discussed more strongly than it was several years ago. In Germany we can observe (often with a certain degree of astonishment) that the social importance of Christianity and church is currently increasing at least in certain respects. For instance, Christian schools are in high demand, services for the first day at school are strongly frequented, and teachers of religious education are being addressed concerning their ritualistic and pastoral skills for general school matters. In society as a whole, Christianity and church are also in demand as interlocutors for ethical, pedagogical and social topics. However, in our pluralistic society they have become one voice among many. They are subsequently forced to adopt a stronger Christian profile and to reassert their original topics and content.

The significance of “objective religion” in religious education is supported further by the theory of education: Education aims at subjectivity, but is not restricted to the inside of the individual – it is rather a reciprocal event between the inside and the outside. An impulse from the outside is necessary to initiate a process of education. This applies especially to the object “religion” since we assume that God influences and changes us as an active subject. Again, the necessity of religion as external factor becomes obvious.

In summary, religious education obviously reflects on subjective and objective religion equally. But how are they related to each other? Let us take a look into the concepts of religious education of recent years.

3. Between children's theology and performance – current concepts of religious education

In the current debates concerning religious education the unsolved tension between “subjective” and “objective” religion is obvious. Occasionally, individuals and content, i.e. subjective and objective religion are simply juxtaposed. This can for instance be observed in the considerations of the “EKD-Kommission zur religionspädagogischen Ausbildung” from 1997. This document claims that future teachers of religious education need to acquire the skills, “die unterrichtlichen und erzieherischen Aufgaben des Religionsunterrichts *theologisch sachgemäß* und *schülerorientiert* wahrzunehmen.”⁵ Two points of reference are thus referred to without being specifically related to each other.

More commonly, we find evidence in various concepts that highlight one aspect or the other. Here follows one example for each.

3.1 Children's theology – oriented towards subjective religion

Children's theology can be understood either as “theology for children” or as “theology with children” from a semantic and factual point of view.⁶ The focus and main characteristic of this approach, however, is the “genitivus subjectivus”, i.e. a “theology by children”: children are understood as subjects of theology. Accordingly, their significance differs from the problem-oriented model of the 1970s which focused on the question of the pupils, but rather answered questions than asked them. The concept of children's theology encourages children to develop and express their own imagination and understanding of God and the world. These thoughts are considered valuable without being labelled as right or wrong or used as a starting point for a “correct” statement subsequently recited by the teacher. Methodologically, such an atmosphere for learning is created by discussions providing the children with space for their own theological discoveries through impulses and adequate questions.

This model presupposes an understanding of theology that is not restricted to a scientific theology. Children's theology is understood as communal or layperson's theology everyone is believed to be capable of and which is not denied to children from the outset. In contrast to the scientific theology the systematic theologian Wilfrid Härle characterises children's

⁵ Kirchenamt der EKD (Hg.): Im Dialog über Glauben und Leben. Zur Reform des Lehramtsstudiums Evangelische Theologie / Religionspädagogik. Empfehlungen der gemischten Kommission, Gütersloh 1997, 47.

⁶ Friedrich Schweitzer: Was ist und wozu Kindertheologie?, in: Anton A. Bucher u.a. (Hg.), “Im Himmelreich ist keiner sauer”. Kinder als Exegeten (JaBuKi Bd. 2), Stuttgart 2003, (9-18), 11ff.

theology with the aspects of “elementary questions”, “embodiment of thinking”, “radical questions”, and above all “alienation of trust”.⁷

A critical perspective of the concept of children's theology derives from the opposition within the area of conflict, i.e. the question concerning the theological “object” or the “objective religion”. Rainer Anselm, for instance, does not conceive the religious ideas of children as theology, since they lack the normative element and abandon subjectivity. Anselm thus initially provides a valuable piece of information: part of the essence of theology is the fact that it “normativen Fragen nicht ausweicht (does not avoid normative questions)”⁸. However, Anselm's justification is as difficult as it is interesting concerning relationship between subjective and objective religion: Anselm justifies the normative function of theology with the “Bedürfnis des Einzelnen nach Gewissheit (need for certainty of the individual)” that is not fulfilled by children's theology. However, his statement restricts the role of theology to that of providing certainty. Naturally, this is one possible function of theology, but it can just as well shake up faith, disturb and question it, or lead to a religious reorientation. The encounter with Christian traditions can also alter one's subjective religion, be it in a beneficial and supportive capacity, or questioning and unsettling.

In the context of children's theology this has the following meaning: Although theological discoveries of children are highly appreciated an important opportunity for their religious development would be wasted if the efforts of religious education were restricted to the acknowledgement and appreciation of subjective religion. Children's theology itself emphasises that children are not to be limited to their pre-existing ideas, they rather have to be offered thoughts on which to further develop their subjective religion. This assessment applies even more strongly to the emerging theology of adolescents because adolescents are more hesitant to offer religious thoughts of their own accord, but rather react to incentive. This brings us back to “objective religion”: Christian tradition and content can serve as incentive for children and adolescents to deal with and explain, develop or change their subjective religion.

Let us now consider the alternative.

⁷ Wilfrid Härle. Was haben Kinder in der Theologie verloren? Systematisch-theologische Überlegungen zum Projekt einer Kindertheologie, in: Anton A. Bucher u.a. (ed.) “Zeit ist immer da. Kinder erleben Hoch-Zeiten und Fest-Tage” (JaBuKi Bd.3), Stuttgart 2004, (11-27) 22ff.

⁸ Rainer Anselm: Verändert die Kindertheologie die Theologie?, in: Anton Bucher u.a. (ed.): “Vielleicht hat Gott uns Kindern den Verstand gegeben”. Ergebnisse und Perspektiven der Kindertheologie (Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie 5), Stuttgart 2006, 13-25, 22.

3.2 Performative religious education – oriented towards “objective religion”

Performative religious education provides an example for a concept indebted mainly to “objective religion”. Its focus lies on the confessional and institutional forms of religion. This concept employs the semiotic approach that religion can only truly be learned through its forms, places and ways of expression. The Gospel achieves “nur im Modus der Inszenierung repräsentative Wirklichkeit”⁹. “Religiös wird man durch religiöse Praxis und nicht, weil ein primäres inneres religiöses Bedürfnis sekundär nach religiösen Ausdrucksformen sucht. (One becomes religious through religious practice, and not because a primary inner religious need is searching for religious forms of expression)” According to him, acting and experiencing have to be given precedence over explanation and reflection. Since the minority of pupils would have experienced this in their families or in church it is the duty of religious education. The pupils encounter religious activity and are given the chance to use them – temporarily at first. Besides biblical narratives liturgical elements such as singing, praying or blessing are staged in religious education, where the pupils are invited to participate on trial.

The performative approach therefore enters the area of conflict from the other side, namely from the objective forms of Christian – protestant – religion. This approach enables the encounter of “objective religion”. The problem remains whether the performative approach regresses beyond the acceptance of the religious subject and the encouragement to develop an independent opinion and to question tradition.¹⁰ Those in favour of the performative approach claim that a critical debate with the acquired content and forms is not excluded and that it is possible to decline them.¹¹ Therefore, the alternatives are to participate in the existing forms of objective religion or to decline them. The subject's own creative thoughts and individual religiousness are hardly taken into account.

Additionally, the performative approach neglects the fact that forms of “objective religion” can only be interpreted subjectively and gain significance in this manner. They only receive meaning for one's own life if connected with own experiences and given a subjective meaning. In this case, the subjective access to Christian traditions should not only be considered but also intended and supported. Further, the lack of Christian socialisation at home does

⁹ Thomas Klie: Konfirmandenunterricht – Trauerspiel, Musical oder Komödie? Dramaturgische Aspekte kirchlicher Unterweisung, PTh 89 (2000), 175-191, wieder abgedruckt (und zitiert nach) in: Bernhard Dressler / Thomas Klie / Carsten Mork (ed.), Konfirmandenunterricht. Didaktik und Inszenierung, Hannover 2001, 317-335, 331.

¹⁰ Cf. For example Godwin Lämmermann: Religionspädagogik zwischen politischer und ästhetischer Signatur. Eine nicht ganz unpolemische Auseinandersetzung zur Rettung der Ästhetik vor den Ästhetern, ZPT 57 (2005), 358-368.

¹¹ Cf. Bernhard Dressler: Religionsdidaktische Optionen. Eine topographische Lageskizze zum Unterschied zwischen Religionsunterricht und Konfirmandenunterricht, in: ders. u.a., Didaktik und Inszenierung, 133-151, 140.

not automatically mean a lack of subjective religiousness for the pupils. The major task of present-day religious education appears to be the recognition and appreciation of this subjective religiousness, while at the same time stimulating it with forms of objective religion. Subjective and objective religion are thus linked with each other: The crucial point is the relationship between these two aspects.

Subsequently, the clarification of the aims and direction of religious education becomes even more urgent. How exactly are subjective and objective religion to be related to each other? What is our aim regarding religious education? I would like to propose the following.

4. Discovering the Value of Christian Tradition for everyday life – concerning the aims of religious education

In order to evaluate the relationship between subjective and objective religion on the level of religious education, I would like to recall the present religious situation: As demonstrated above, today's access to religiousness has become its significance for one's personal life. A defining aspect concerning the acceptance and acknowledgement of religious content, thoughts, beliefs, practices and orientations is the degree of their use for everyday life. In religious education this tendency is often reflected by pupils asking: "What use is this to me?"

The question regarding use and relevance for every day life is addressed to Christian tradition in today's religious education – partly as open question, partly provocatively.¹²

From the point of view of theology and religious education this question is often criticised as utilitarianism. It is said to follow the logic of modern societies and the current instrumentalisation of "education" and would not do justice to Christian faith – because faith does not ask for superficial usefulness, but rather addresses the individual deeply as a person. This *concern* may naturally be agreed to, however, the *rejection* of the question falls short in my opinion. It wastes the opportunity to inquire theologically after the relevance and use of Christian tradition and Christian faith for everyday life provoked by the character of current religiousness. I interpret this question as claim, but also as an expression of hope that Christian religion could and should prove useful and helpful for our daily life.

This hope seems to address a fundamental dimension of Christianity and leads into a genuinely theological debate. If we look back on the history of Christianity, the expansion of the faith in the resurrected Jesus Christ can barely be imagined if such a belief had not

¹² Cf. z.B. Joachim Kunstmann: Religionspädagogik. Eine Einführung, Göttingen 2004, 274: "Die Frage nach dem Lebensbezug, die von den Kirchen wenig bedient wird, scheint für die Weitergabe der Religion darum zum entscheidenden Punkt zu werden. Nicht Wahrheit, sondern *Bedeutung* und *Betroffenheit* bestimmen über ihre Aneignung und über ein entsprechendes Interesse – ‚Wahr‘ ist, was betrifft. Das ist für das traditionelle christliche Denken eine höchst ungewohnte Wendung, die auf teils entrüstete Ablehnung stößt."

proved to be relevant and useful for people's lives. The New Testament scholar Gerd Theißen defines the “success” of early Christianity in the Hellenistic world. He defines religion as “kulturelles Zeichensystem, das Lebensgewinn durch Entsprechung zu einer letzten Wirklichkeit verheißt”¹³ and the judaeo-Christian tradition as means in the “Dialog mit dem einen und einzigen Gott... Lebensgewinn zu erzielen”¹⁴. The two testaments of the Bible can be interpreted as witness that people experienced the contact with the one and only God as relevant for their lives. Accordingly, one can find traces in the Bible for defining the relationship between objective and subjective religion which are also relevant for religious education. The issue concerns the “use for everyday life” of “objective religion” for the subject. The central point is not the simple fulfillment of short-term desires, but rather a complex correlation that addresses the depth of the individual. At present life itself has become a creative challenge. It has to be one's “own life”¹⁵, that cannot simply be lived as it goes by, but has to be decided, adjusted and moulded anew from a multitude of options every day. An increasing number of people experience this not only as a challenge, but rather as a major effort with uncertain results. Children and adolescents are also aware of the demand. The support for this uncertainty in life is also sought in religious context, but an answer is not always expected in Christian faith. The problem of plausibility is apparent: On the one hand “life” is a central theological topic¹⁶, on the other hand theological competence for life is often disputed. Hans-Günter Heimbrock, on of the few scholars of religious education who has dedicated himself to the concept of life sums up: “Beunruhigend ist..., dass... im alltäglichen Leben nicht wenige Zeitgenossen... den Zusammenhang von christlicher Religion und Leben weniger eng sehen, ja – kirchliche Verkündigung und religiöse Erziehung pauschalisierend eher mit Lebensferne gleichsetzen.”¹⁷ It is indeed possible that the “use for life” of the Christian tradition has so far not become plausible – it cannot be raised as normative statement, but has to be detected and perceived. For instance, how does the theological insight of the unconditional justification of humankind by God impact on the attitude to life? What does the possibility of a real new beginning due to the willingness for forgiveness achieve in the life of an individual, or the distinction between the last two aspects? In my opinion it is a central duty of religious education to describe more precisely than before and through dialogue with other disciplines the relevance of Christian faith for

¹³ Gerd Theißen: *Die Religion der ersten Christen Eine Theorie des Urchristentums*, Gütersloh 2000, 19.

¹⁴ Gerd Theißen: *Exegese und Homiletik. Neue Textmodelle als Impuls für neue Predigten*, in: Uta Pohl-Patalong / Frank Muchlinsky (eds.): *Predigen im Plural. Homiletische Aspekte*, Hamburg 2001, 55-67, 56.

¹⁵ Ulrich Beck: *Eigenes Leben. Ausflüge in die unbekannte Gesellschaft, in der wir leben*, München 2003.

¹⁶ Dietrich Korsch calls it a permanent item of Theology, Cf. Dietrich Korsch: ‘Leben’ als Thema gelebter Religion, in: Albrecht Grözinger / Georg Pfeleiderer (ed.): *‘Gelebte Religion als Programmbezug Systematischer und Praktischer Theologie*, Zürich 2002, 191.

¹⁷ Hans-Günter Heimbrock: *Kann das Leben die Religion ersetzen? Religionstheoretische Überlegungen zur Konjunktur eines Begriffs*, in: Markus Witte, *Der eine Gott und die Welt der Religionen. Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen und zum interreligiösen Dialog*, Würzburg 2003, 387-409, 391.

everyday life. Religious education is especially challenged by the fact that this question is asked more forcibly by one side of religious education, the common religiousness. This question can become didactically productive when dealt with by the other side of the area of conflict, namely the Christian tradition.

From this angle the pupils' explicit or implicit question how relevant Christian content and ecclesiastic forms of expression are or can become for their lives is not only legitimate, but also very productive. The aim of religious education therefore is to make the usefulness and relevance of Christian tradition transparent. Disputes concerning the primacy of either tradition or the living environment are therefore definitively obsolete: Both aspects belong genuinely together, since the relevance of the one concerns the other.

I would like to make this basic identification of the aims of religious education transparent with the help of four examples:

5. Usefulness for Life in dialogue – Guidelines

5.1. Proof of different forms of relevance for life

The claim that Christian faith is beneficial for life and promises an increase of the quality of life constitutes the working-hypothesis for religious education. In the context of theory of education it has to be understood as external impulse which is dealt with subjectively by pupils. Whether or not this hypothesis applies to all pupils cannot be predetermined, but rather needs to be established in a longer working process. The result of this process remains open due to the character of public schools and due to theological reasons – “faith” as a learning target cannot be established.¹⁸

In addition, the role of the subject is not limited to the alternatives of acceptance or refusal. In terms of religious education, it is significant to open up various alternatives of experiencing Christian traditions as relevant and helpful for one's own life. It must be possible to discover variegated meanings, interpretations and values. This means that pupils are not restricted to learning a single message and meaning already established, but they are rather encouraged to find a personal access to Christian traditions and forms of ecclesiastic expression. Religious education should not be limited to showing a single pre-existing way to improve life, it rather needs to introduce a possibility.¹⁹ From the didactic point of view,

¹⁸ “Ob aber Lernende sich von der probeweise angenommenen Hypothese eines Blicks auf die Welt aus der Sicht des christlichen Glaubens so überzeugen lassen, daß ihnen daraus eine ihr Leben tragende und ihr Leben verändernde Kraft erwächst, liegt nicht in der Reichweite didaktisch operationalisierbarer Intentionen.” (Bernhard Dressler, *Bildende Religion – gebildeter Glaube*, in: ZPT 50, 1998, 395-409, 404). He calls this a “Wahrnehmungsperspektive, die gewissermaßen im Zuge eines Probedenkens an Evidenz gewinnen kann.”

¹⁹ Cf. Uta Pohl-Patalong: *Die Bibel im Konfirmationsunterricht – Rezeptionsästhetische Erwägungen und methodische Konsequenzen*, EvTh 63 (2003), 296-310.

teachers should not aim at fixed targets of learning, they should formulate them abstractly (accordingly not “pupils need to understand that ...”, but “pupils should be capable of discovering that ...”).

5.2. Reference to experience and reflection

The relevance of Christian tradition for everyday life can naturally be employed in debates on certain questions. However, this relevance is not limited to such use, it also extends to all levels and senses of personhood. Regarding religious education, at this point one may follow up the debate related to the expression “aesthetical education”, which emphasises the meaning of emotions for the learning process. If the discovery of relevance for life would be limited to rational plausibility, the learning process would remain on the surface of reproducible knowledge and would not do justice to comprehending the person. The usefulness for life of the Christian tradition should not only be made plausible, it should also be made (at least partially) accessible to experience. In this regard, the insight of performative approach to explain “objective religion” and to show that it can be experienced is convincing. In my opinion, it is even more important that references to experience and phases involving reflection alternate. Experiences need to be reflected continuously from a distant perspective and need to be canvassed regarding the “usefulness for life”.

5.3. Critical survey of different forms of religiousness

At this point it should be obvious that the reference to life should include a critical attitude towards certain forms of life and also towards certain forms of religion.²⁰ This critical attitude is in need of criteria.²¹ Rudolf Englert refers to the task of formulating criteria as “ideologiekritische Unterscheidungsarbeit” (ideology-critical task of differentiation), for which religious education can profit from biblical and historical sources.

“Die jüdisch-christliche Tradition ... zeigt ein starkes religionskritisches Interesse. Fragen nach der Authentizität eines religiösen Erbes, nach den Kennzeichen des wahren Propheten, nach der rechten Weise der Gottesverehrung, nach den Grenzen der ‘vera religio’ werden ... in großer Schärfe gestellt ... In dem Maße, wie entsprechende Unterscheidungskriterien über den jeweiligen religiösen Binnen-Diskurs hinaus plausibel zu machen waren (z.B. in der frühchristlichen Apologetik, in den reformatorischen Kontroversen... usw.) war man gezwungen, sich den Legitimationsstan-

²⁰ “Wir lernen daran neu, dass religiöse Inhalte nicht einfach per se gut sind, sondern dass es sehr wohl gerade heute auch um eine theologische Klärung der diffusen religiösen Szenen geht, die uns angeboten werden. Religiosität kann manchmal auf eine subtile Weise sehr destruktiv sein.” (Ulrich Schwab: Den Faden suchen. Zum Profil einer Religionspädagogik in der Moderne, PTh 91 (2002), 417-428, 423.)

²¹ Cf. Friedrich Schweitzer, Religionspädagogik (Lehrbuch Praktische Theologie Bd.1), Gütersloh 2006, 155.

dards der jeweiligen Zeit zu stellen und seine Sichtweise zu begründen. Aus entsprechenden Auseinandersetzungen verfügt das Christentum über ein Unterscheidungskwissen, das für einen kritischen Umgang mit religiösen Deutungsmustern von bleibendem Interesse ist.“²² (“The Jewish-Christian tradition ... displays a strong interest in criticising religion. Questions concerning authenticity of religious heritage, characteristics of a true prophet, the right way to worship God, the boundaries of ‘vera religio’ are ... raised sharply ... To the same degree, to which respective criteria for differentiation needed to be made plausible in inner-religious debates [e.g. in Early-Christian apologetics, in protestant controversies etc.] it was also necessary to face standards of legitimation of the corresponding era and justify its perception. Due to the respective debates Christianity commands a knowledge of differentiation that is constantly significant for criticism of religious patterns of thoughts.”).

In the context of religious education all forms of “subjective“ and objective“ religion do not only need to be on a par with each other, but they are also questioned for their contribution for life, individually as well as socially. Accordingly, religious education conveys a kind of “religious quality awareness“ to pupils, which enables them to deal with their own religious perspectives and the religiousness of others sensibly, and to some extent also critically.²³

5.4. Dialogue with other religions and forms of religiousness

Within the context of religious pluralism such an orientation necessarily leads to the question whether or not and to what degree Christian traditions are more (or differently) helpful for life than other religions or forms of religiousness. This inter-religious dimension which also includes diffuse forms of religiousness is an elementary part of religious education, as is also emphasised in “Gymnasiums“ in Denmark. Similarly, in all other European countries protestant religious education always deals with its contents in the presence of other religions and forms of religiousness. Therefore, a dialogue with different world-views is initiated, which is rightfully accepted as indispensable element of social coexistence. A comparable approach is incidentally expected from Jewish and Islamic religious education, as the aspect of “usefulness for life“ is also taken into consideration in the corresponding position and needs to be compared with the position of other religions.

In the context of religious pluralism, religious education must neither be limited to a mere Christian perspective, nor merge with undifferentiated plurality. Therefore, religious education presupposes a differentiated and reflected perception of different perspectives

²² Rudolf Englert, Religionspädagogik in der Schule, in: Friedrich Schweitzer / Thomas Schlag (ed.), Religionspädagogik im 21. Jahrhundert (Religionspädagogik in pluraler Gesellschaft Bd.4), Gütersloh/Freiburg 2005, 79-93, 90.

²³ A.a.O., 90f.

which is connected with a position of its own. Thus, this subject proves to be capable of plurality without the lack of a clear-cut perspective.

Didactically and methodologically various options exist in order to follow these basic guidelines. I would like to conclude by introducing one approach I am personally aligned with, namely the Bibliolog.

6. Bibliolog as approach for religious education – Methodological concretion

Forms of “objective religion” can occur in many different shapes. For theological and didactical reasons, I prefer to focus on biblical texts. They especially challenge the reader to deal with them subjectively. By discussing these texts openly, pupils can make numerous discoveries of their own and gain knowledge without being limited to expressions of creeds. Dealing with them also has the advantage of not being restricted to decide either in favour of or against faith. In this case, certain methodological approaches are helpful in order to clearly relate subjective experiences to biblical traditions, or, in other words, in order to develop “subjective religion” with the help of “objective religion”. One of numerous approaches corresponding with this aim is the so-called Bibliolog.²⁴

The Bibliolog represents a relatively new (but in recent years increasingly popular) approach to interpret biblical narratives, which aims at filling “blank positions” and “gaps” of narratives with identifying oneself with certain biblical figures referred to in biblical texts. The Bibliolog was invented, or rather discovered by the American Jew Peter Pitzele on the background of his expertise in psycho-drama and studies in literature. This approach is indebted to rabbinic hermeneutics representing a modern form of Midrash, according to which passages of the Torah can be interpreted by a creative completion of its gaps. Rabbinic hermeneutics distinguishes between the so-called “black fire” (i.e. the content of the letters of a biblical text) and the “white fire” (i.e. the space between the words). Fanning the “white fire”, i.e. the gaps between the letters, opens up possibilities to connect one's own experiences in life with biblical passages and thus to approach the text from a new perspective. Subsequently, one is no longer in a distant position towards the text, but rather becomes part of the narrative. However, the aim of the Bibliolog is always the awareness of the text. At the same time, the identification with a certain role of a biblical character enables participants to keep a distance – the biblical figure is responding to the text, not the participant. Therefore, this approach is easily made accessible to pupils with various different religious affiliations.

²⁴ Cf. Uta Pohl-Patalong; *Bibliolog. Impulse für Gottesdienst, Gemeinde und Schule. Band 1: Grundformen*, Stuttgart (2009) ²2010

The process of a Bibliolog is as follows: A facilitator introduces into a biblical narrative and stimulates the fantasy of pupils regarding the situation of the given passage. Within this process insightful information gained by historical-critical and socio-historical methods plays a significant role. When a passage obviously contains “white fire”, the facilitator reads out a sentence or a short passage. He then assigns the pupils a certain role from the biblical narrative, addresses them as such and asks them questions which are unanswered at the current stage of the narrative.

The pupils have the liberty to answer the question (one after the other) in the appropriate role (i.e. in the first person singular). The participating pupils identify themselves with the biblical figure, thus exploring the figure “from within”. At the same time, they replenish their role and their understanding of the biblical figure with their own personal experiences.

The facilitator listens to the pupils’ comments and amplifies them. By employing this technique of “echoing” even quiet statements of participants are made audible, and statements only implying emotions are emphasised. If participants only hint at facts in their answers, the facilitator can employ the technique of “interviewing” to obtain a clear answer. In any case, the facilitator needs to be in line with the participants, it is not his or her task to lure the participants into mentioning a certain aspect the facilitator himself or herself might find more interesting or feel to be neglected.

The facilitator returns to the text itself after some comments have been made. Then the next part of the narrative is read. The facilitator interrupts the reading again, when questions remain unanswered in the text. The participants receive a new role, either the biblical figure referred to already now facing a new situation, or a new character. Again, the pupils are given the opportunity to make a statement.

After a few scenes the Bibliolog ends. The facilitator discharges the participants from their role(s) and leads them back into the present. The various statements of the participants and the corresponding different approaches remain adjacent to each other without further qualification or the attempt to unify them into a single message.

I would like to demonstrate the way a Bibliolog functions by applying it to the resurrection narrative according to Matthew. The facilitator introduces the participants to the situation of Jesus’ followers after his arrest and crucifixion. This situation is not only characterised by grief and pain, but also puts into question what they considered relevant for their lives during the past years. This introduction provides the notional and emotional background for the three women on their way to Jesus’ grave in order to anoint his body with oil as was customary at that time.

The first possible question might be addressed to Mary Magdalene: Mary, you and your companions are now, early in the morning, approaching the grave of the one who has played such a significant role for you during the past years. I can only imagine that your head is full of thoughts. What are you thinking right now?

Some possible answers are:

- “It is terrible. He really is dead. He is not here anymore.”
- “He already told us that he was going to die. However, I have never been capable of imagining it. And now?”
- “I don’t know how to carry on. So far it has been him who told us what to do next. Who will tell us now?”

A second role could then ask – after the earthquake, the descending angel whose appearance is similar to a lightning and the frightened watchmen: “Mary, what is your first reaction to these events?”

A third role should take into consideration the reaction of the women as the angel in the white garment announces the resurrection of Christ, which is characterised as “fear and great delight”.

“Mary, you experience fear and great delight. What kind of fear do you feel – and what kind of delight? Is one emotion stronger than the other or are they both linked together?”

Finally, the women might be asked what kind of thoughts and emotions they will take with them on their way to the other disciples to inform them about the recent events.

After dealing with a couple of passages the Bibliolog ends and the participants are discharged from their roles and return to the present. Afterwards the experiences made during the Bibliolog can be worked with in more detail, according to the proposals made above. It is important that the differences between the biblical text and the subjective interpretation and development of the gaps (i.e. the “black” and the “white fire”) remain clear to avoid the interpretation gaining more significance than the text itself. Methodologically such a distinction is made by keeping the roles close to the *Vorlage* (i.e. the biblical text), by permanently relating to the text and reading the entire text again as conclusion.

The Bibliolog does not only offer the opportunity to become acquainted with the biblical resurrection narrative, but also to encounter it as an event that changes one's own life. The identification with biblical figures creates an atmosphere in which one's own experiences and considerations can be related to the biblical narrative, which at the same time can be questioned and expanded. Thus, a basis for reflection and debate is provided on a cognitive level, which can be re-connected with everyday experiences. Subsequently, “objective” and “subjective” religion are combined in a productive relationship, which allows the relevance of life in one area to be addressed in the other.