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“I Like These Lessons Because They Are More Personal”

Mystagogical Learning – An Approach to Open Religious Education for (Religious) Experiences

Talking about God has not only become problematic in the field of religious education. Even in conversations among experts and people who are especially interested in the topic, it is likely that a situation as the one in the movie “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy” (Jennings 2005) occurs. One of the key scenes of the movie could be helpful to illustrate one of the most challenging difficulties when it comes to the quest of God.

Once again, it is the essential question, the question of the meaning of life, which eventually shapes the scene. Everybody wants to know what the solution to the essential question could be and thus they entrust the one thing which can be consulted for every other question, too. It is their best computer: deep thought. Things become a bit comical at this point already. On the one hand, we hear that the essential question, the question of the meaning of life is not just a question asked by us, or one could even say a question asked by a former generation. This seems to be an important question even for people in the future. It is interesting and awkward at the same time that people do not discuss and argue about this question but ask a computer for solution. Finally, the computer finishes his calculation which leads to the key moment: People assemble because they are curious about the answer and are secretly expecting a revolutionary answer.

The solution to the question of the meaning of life is: 42, an astonishing and at the same time absurd answer. The faces of the people living in the future speak for themselves: the answer given by “deep thought” does not live up to their expectations and hopes, because it belongs to a category which is not home to the question of the meaning of life. 42 might be a correct answer, however, only syntactically. This answer is too flat and irrelevant and is not even tempting to be further discussed for a better comprehension of it.

In a similar way, this happens to the question of God in theological conversations and in religious education: the theological answers given in the conversation

are appropriate, but these answers do not reach out to adolescents. It seems that the Christian answer, which offers a personal God, does not provide what young adolescents are looking for when they ask for the meaning of life, because these answers do not seem to apply to their experiences. The gap between answers of the Christian faith and the search for answers of adolescents is one of the most exciting and most difficult challenges in religious education today.

This gap opens up a number of questions: What does it need to make Christian answers relevant again so that adolescents can reconsider these beliefs with regard to their own interpretation of life. Why is it important at all to discuss the Christian question of God in today's context of religious plurality, and not simply to dismiss it as obsolete. Why does religious education as a subject in school maintain an important function in this discussion? And what should a concept of the subject religious education in school look like in order to meet the following challenges: on the one hand it has to address the Christian interpretation of the meaning of life and other religion's approaches to the essential question in a way that does not simplify the issue. On the other hand, religious education has to fulfill the requirements of education in general and thus it has to demonstrate how religious education contributes to the aims of education in general.¹ The following article addresses the concept of mystagogical learning and thus offers an approach to the previous questions.

Therefore, the first part will highlight statements of adolescents which aim at showing what the quest of God and the question about the meaning of life actually means to them. These serve as a basis to formulate how religious education can meet these needs and how it can trigger a development in this area. For that this article will outline in a second part (2) the concept of mystagogical learning as a possibility to deal with the challenges outlined above. In connection with this the question why the quest of God is still worth dealing with, this leads to the third part (3) which discusses the question that evolves out of the concept of mystagogical learning: What should religious education as a subject in school look like? In other words, the approach of mystagogical learning also asks about the advantage of a so-called positional religious education opposed to merely an "instruction to religion".

¹ In Germany, religious education is constitutionally enshrined (GG Art. 7 Abs. 3) and taught in denominational. That's not the same as the so called confessional approach in Great Britain. Confessional RE in Germany means: RE is done by teachers who are rooted in certain confessions and who are able to deal with the existential dimension of religion.

1 Some Spotlights on Juvenile Statements Referring to the Question of God

Adolescents have an image of God and religion even if they do not believe in such a transcendent reality and are not religious themselves. The following statements illustrate the variety of such concepts.

Thomas, aged 21, roman-catholic:

“I envy people for being able to say, they have experienced God. Personally, I haven’t had any experience like this.”

Janine, aged 17, undenominational:

“Even though I’m not religious, I sometimes pray to God – whether I believe in him or not.” (Calmbach, Borgstedt, Borchard, Thomas & Flaig 2016: 344)

Gaby, aged 15 years, non-denominational:

“... I take part in Religious Education in school. First – that was my parents’ decision. Today I still take part and I’m really interested. And it’s important to know about religion. Religious Education was never a problem for me, although I’m quite sure, that I do not believe.”

Despite the differences of empirical studies about religion – concerning research questions, reliability, and research design – they all agree on the following aspects:

- 1) Religion is still a relevant topic for adolescents, and
- 2) the “quest for God” – understood as seeking the “ultimate” also remains a concerning issue.
- 3) Religious experience matters, although adolescents usually admit, that they had not had any for themselves. (Ziebertz, Kalbheim & Riegel 2003)
- 4) RE is an important platform to deal with God, religion and life – also for adolescents describing themselves as non-religious. (Calmbach et al. 2016)

The fact that the search for meaning and for a higher being is still important to young adults and the fact that their own experience plays a vital role in this search leads to further questions or rather duties Religious Education has to deal with.

- How can these experiences become productive in a sense that they serve as a bridge between the search for meaning of young adults and the answers the Christian faith has to offer?
- How can RE underline and support the juvenile attitude towards religion?
- What is the role of religious experiences in RE?
- What is the contribution of RE in school – as it is an important platform to deal with God, religion and life – also for adolescents describing themselves as nonreligious?
- How can we shape RE to help adolescents growing in their religious attitudes and their reflections on religion?

Taking these questions seriously, the concept of the so called “mystagogical learning” (in selection Schambeck 2006; 2015) will be presented as a pathway to shape RE as helpful for adolescents. Mystagogical learning does not diminish the issues relating the quest of God to a solely informative discourse and thus to pure cognition, but rather includes and highly appreciates the dimension of experience. Therefore, the concept could be a helpful tool to bridge the gap between the question of meaning asked by young adults and the answers the Christian faith has to offer to these questions.

2 The Concept and Aims of Mystagogical Learning

Firstly, the concept of mystagogical learning, outlined in this article, differs from the liturgic-sacramental mystagogy. The latter type reduces mystagogy to an introduction to sacraments. Secondly, my way of thinking mystagogy also differs from the so called catechetical mystagogy. In the catechetical type, mystagogy is understood as an introduction to a totally foreign world – the world of faith – and shaped as a model to make students learn in religion.

My concept of mystagogical learning is based on two main ideas: (1) the systematic-theological understanding, that God is “in world” and relationship is the first and most important moment of connection between God and human beings; (2) the didactical figure of “correlation”. Both ideas are mutually related.

Human Being as Being Capable of God – Systematic-Theological Implications

My concept of mystagogical learning is based on Karl Rahner’s (1904–1984) theology. The crucial point for the different actualizations of a transcendental mystagogy is the idea that human beings are intrinsically open to God. God initiated relationship with men and women and can – so far – be interpreted as a constitutive and internal part of the human being. One important conclusion that can be drawn is that God has not been brought to human beings by the missionaries, but God came first. It is not the dogma that constitutes God. It is not the liturgy that puts God into existence. All these things – the catechetics, the dogma, the liturgy – are second. At first God remains in man’s heart. And man is capable to experience God. Therefore, Karl Rahner characterizes the human being as a “hearer of God” i. e. “Hörer des Wortes” (K. Rahner) and God is a “God in world”.

This is the fundamental systematic-theological idea. However, that does not mean, that this personal relationship with God is also the first in biographic turns. Normally we learn about God, or start to reflect on him, because there were some friends talking about him, or there was an interesting question in school and so on. In the transcendental mystagogical learning the personal relationship between God and man and therefore the experience of God comes first and is prior to dogmatics,

to ethics, and aesthetics is the point of the hermeneutical reflections, not the practical ones.

Correlation as the Main Didactical Figure of Mystagogical Learning

The second main point of the concept of mystagogical learning – as a result of the first point and the didactical transformation – is: The communication within the quest for God is characterized by a mutual, correlative and critical-productive relationship between subjects and traditions, meaning that you can get in touch with God's revelation through tradition as well as through the subjects. With regard to RE it is crucial to study:

- 1) the subjects
- 2) the traditions
- 3) the critical-productive correlation of traditions and subjects.

God – from the Learners' Perspective

In dealing with the quest for God it is of course essential to know about the Christian-Jewish tradition on the one hand. On the other hand, it is equally necessary to focus on the quest for God from the perspective of the subjects. Referring to the juvenile quest for God it is necessary to study:

- 1) the question, if God exists (belief in God),
- 2) the question, in which way adolescents conceptualise the question of God (concepts) and
- 3) the question, how significant these questions are for their life-style (significance) (in variation to Stögbauer 2011).

Concerning all these aspects there are a lot of structural variations between the perspectives of subjects: for example, there is a difference between children and adolescents, between girls and boys and between people, who have to struggle in life and who do not. Furthermore, whether the reflection takes place in RE in school, in catechesis, in adult education or simply in peer-groups. For knowing more about these and other differences concerning the individual perspective on the question of God, empirical research is not only helpful, but even necessary.

God – from the Perspective of Traditions

The "two circles" (K. Rahner) *of the quest for God*: In the beginning it has become evident, that mystagogical learning depends on both sides – the subjects and their individual perspective on the quest for God on the one hand, and on the other hand the objective inscriptions in the quest for God provided by religious traditions. Rahner understands this context more precisely by thinking the quest for God in a special mode. He distinguishes two basically different levels i.e. ways i.e. circles: the circle of the existential dimension of the quest for God and the circle of expression (Rahner 1970). The first circle of the question of God – following Rahner – is the experience of God. God reveals himself to the world and to mankind. He makes

himself accessible. Most impressively this becomes obvious in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To interpret the question of God in this first sense therefore means emphasizing the existential dimension and realizing God in man's heart by bringing these aspects up. Moreover, the experience of God doesn't want to be hidden. In fact, the experience of God urges to be expressed. This refers to the second circle. The experience of God wants to be reflected, to be interpreted and to become transferred into action and behaviour. Expressing the experience of God takes place in three different but related ways: (1) in the way of aesthetics, (2) of cognition and (3) of action and behaviour.

The concept of mystagogical learning considers not only one, but both circles – the dimension of experience and the dimension of expression – and it considers both circles in the processes of religious education. That evokes the question, if it is possible to insinuate the dimension of experience in processes of religious learning at all. This limit is inevitable, because the deep experience of God is and will always remain a gift. At the same time emphasizing the experience lines out that the personal relationship comes definitely first, for example in contrast to Neo-Scholastic-thinking. The blasting force of this emphasis becomes evident by designating its consequences: Dogma, kerygma und liturgy are not any longer the reasons of belief, instead, God's relationship to human beings is. Nevertheless, they do not lose their meaning: Even if dogma, kerygma and liturgy are not seen as the origin of belief any longer, they remain the interpretation of God's revelation and man's experience.

Mutual, Correlative and Critical-Productive Relationship between Subjects and Tradition

Mystagogical learning as a productive combination of individual and objective inscriptions of the quest for God: According to the concept of correlation mystagogical processes depend on the relationship between the individual perspective and (!) the perspective of the traditions. Only if both dimensions are brought together and are referred to each other, a vital learning process will take place. Then real made experiences can actualize, modify and develop religious traditions – and vice versa. These communications are indeed the most important but also the most difficult part of mystagogical learning in actu. This becomes evident by taking a closer look on juvenile belief: Indeed, many young people still believe in God, they do it not in a way that is concerned by the Christian tradition. In fact, the belief in God exists without a strong connection to the traditions and is usually regarded as irrelevant for the juvenile life-style and their religious attitude (Stögbauer 2011). Therefore, searching for connecting factors between both sides is the most fragile part in designing mystagogical processes. More precisely and in other words: People in charge of religious learning have to find “ciphers”, which are able to enlighten the everyday realm as well as the realm of tradition (Schambeck 2014). For example, the search for meaning can be reflected within the horizon of the question of

the transcendent; or putting the question of happiness in dialogue with the question of redemption, which means soteriology. Thereby it's important to neither exploit the everyday realm nor the realm of faith, but to respect both in their diversity. Only in this way it is possible to discover and to describe the possible formative power in relation to each other.

Why the Question of God Matters also Today – Potentials of Mystagogical Learning

Since the concept of mystagogical learning not only takes into consideration both the experiences of the subject and the Christian tradition, but also interrelates these two with one another, the question remains why it is still of importance today to come together in conversation with young adults about the quest of God. Although the statements of young adults regarding their opinion on religion and on the quest for God were only highlights, they clearly demonstrate the great importance of religiosity, of the essential question and especially of transcendental experiences for young adults. The Christian quest for God is nothing different but the Christian expression of this matter. It is the Christian way of thinking of and believing in the relation between transcendency and immanence. In addition to that, the quest for God is also the way of providing space for transcendency within immanence (cf. Pollack & Rosta 2015) because in the Christian notion the quest for God gains the highest priority in the destiny of Jesus of Nazareth.

Consequently, discussing the quest for God with adolescents requires involving the essential question and its existential significance with a possible offer of interpretation. This also requires evaluating the question of meaning as the pivotal element of Christianity and thus one cannot deal with this question as if it were arbitrary or even replaceable. Ultimately it becomes clear that present-day's religious pluralism does not only increase the number of possible answers to and interpretations of the question of meaning, which comes with a certain degree of levelling the question. This pluralism of religions rather functions as a stimulus for religions to distinguish religious offers of construal. This "profiling" leads to a self-reflecting look at and a strengthening of their own answers in order to point out what the very own religion has to offer and how to make this offer accessible for others. By involving the quest of God with its dimension of intensive experience, mystagogical learning may achieve the following aspects concerning the process of religious learning.

- 1) The main idea of mystagogical learning is to emphasize the quest for God as the core of Christian belief. By that, the idea of the "Unverfügbare", which is the realm of the inaccessible – can shape RE in a different way: Education, competences and other benchmarks of qualification are measured against the extent to which they are helpful for the individuals to live their lives successfully and happily and to which extent they are helpful to create a peaceful and just society.

- 2) Mystagogical learning also points out the variety of dimensions of the quest for God. This means – as I have explained – paying attention to its existential dimension as well as to its expressive dimension as it is aesthetics, cognition and praxis. And to emphasize this aspect once more: Pupils at school can't be expected to experience God. This is far beyond the possibilities of didactical designs and methods! Moreover, it overstrains education and school and it doesn't respect the freedom of human beings as well as God himself. Therefore, there has to be a clear difference between the forms of presentation (of the object) on the one hand, which has to include all the dimensions of the quest for God, and on the other hand, forms of learning (by the subjects), which also depend on the places of learning, on time, and the atmosphere etc.
- 3) In the tradition of correlation, mystagogical learning has to be regarded as dealing with the quest for God. This includes the objective as well as the subjective dimension. Thus, mystagogical learning leads to a critical-productive dialogue, in which the subjects are enabled to point out their personal opinion about the quest for God. In this sense, the potentials and limits of correlation are also the strength and the weakness of mystagogical learning.
- 4) Respecting these consequences, mystagogical learning helps to realize that theology, belief and faith have to be in a permanent process of transformation – caused by people's spirituality. Only this process keeps faith and theology vital and relevant for the present and the future. Thereby, mystagogical learning especially addresses and challenges the systematic theology to take the *sensus fidelium* seriously as a *locus theologicus* and hereby to search for and frame a vital theology. In conclusion it becomes evident, that mystagogical learning wants to make a contribution to shape religious learning: Oriented by criteria, the concept wants to revitalize the quest for God as an important part of religious education.

3 Shapes of RE at School: Positional RE vs. Multi-Faith Approach

After all, mystagogical learning is not an omnipotent concept for every aspect of Religious Education. Obviously, it focuses on the quest for God. Furthermore, the concept has certain limits, for example the question whether it is possible to refer to the existential dimension of the quest for God at school. Is it actually possible for young adults to become open for a topic that concerns them in a fundamental way in a setting that is firstly limited by time, secondly shaped by a group consisting of members that one did not choose and thirdly dominated by the element of assessment. It is the question of whether Religious Education as a subject in school constitutes a suitable platform for dealing with the essential question and the quest of

God which is so multidimensional and complex? This again requires to think about the following question: what does a concept of Religious Education as a subject in school have to look like if it aims at bringing religious interpretation of meaning into play for the purpose of learning and education. Especially the last topic is highly controversial in Germany and brings up the question that is of high importance in education policies: should Religious Education as a subject in school be taught as confessional/positional RE (as it is done currently) or rather in the sense of a religious study class? Given the importance of this discussion, I will enter into the question whether religious education is a suitable platform for dealing with the quest of God by addressing the second question.

Contours of Positional Religious Education in Light of Confessional Approach and Multi-Faith Approach

Is it possible for Religious Education that takes place at public institutions such as schools and universities to incorporate elements of catechesis meaning that Religious Education as a subject in school also teaches how to actually practice faith – no matter if it is the Christian, the Jewish or the Islamic faith? Or in contrast, should Religious Education as a subject in school merely exist in the form of religious studies? This would mean that students would be offered knowledge about religion, but religion itself would only be seen and discussed as a system of discourse not taking into account that it could be a life shaping conviction.

In the following, I will present a third way which stands out from the two possibilities given above and which I call “positional” Religious Education and which is firmly known as “confessional” Religious Education in Germany. This type of Religious Education:

- 1) is not a design restricted to ‘learning in religion’ meaning learning how to actually practice faith. However, it includes a certain portion of it. With that the following is meant: the positional approach as a concept of Religious Education is not identical with the so-called “confessional approach” discussed in the Anglo-American literature, even though it is named “konfessioneller Religionsunterricht” in Germany. This confessional approach equals catechesis in school. The positional Religious Education, however, takes into account that catechesis in school does not take the general conditions of school seriously enough. Teaching students in the sense of “learning in religion” as an educational aim of a catechetical religious education contradicts the neutrality of school and the right of freedom of religion which implies that nobody must be forced to religious observance. Even the possibility to deregister from this form of religious education by attending so-called surrogate subjects would not be an adequate solution to this question. After all, religious education in school is under a direct duty to demonstrate its contribution to the student’s general education. Religious Education especially in postmodern societies, in which religion has become a pluralized

phenomenon, the restriction of religious education to solely “learning in religion” is unthinkable.

- 2) Furthermore, the concept of positional Religious Education is not a design narrowed to “learning about religion” which means that religion is merely presented in an informative way with the goal that students gain a comprehensive knowledge of religion (religious literacy). Nevertheless, positional Religious Education includes respective portions of the concept of “learning about religion” to the effect that it wants to equip students with religious literacy.
- 3) Additionally, the concept is not based on the hypothesis that religion could be approached from a meta-level. Thereby, it contrasts with the so-called multi-faith approach which assumes that one and the same teacher can give students an extensive understanding of every religion with its characteristic qualities in the same way. However, the concept of positional Religious Education shares the aim of this approach to address the various religions in a way which allows students to better perceive and eventually deal with their own questions of life through an examination of religions. This way of learning then could be called “learning from and through religion”.
- 4) So the concept of positional Religious Education comprises elements of the confessional approach and thus of “learning in religion”, as well as elements of the concept of religious studies and thus of “learning about religion” and also elements of the multi-faith approach and thus of “learning from and through religion”. However, the characteristic quality that makes it stand out is that religion is processed from a particular religious tradition. Consequently, the concept of Religious Education approaches religion not only as a topic but rather as a conviction of life. This is necessary, because the concept is based on the hermeneutic premise, that human beings are tied to time and space. Therefore, it is impossible for us to discuss religion from an ahistorical meta-level point of view. In the following, I will explain hence the reasons why I consider the concept of positional Religious Education an irreplaceable advantage.

Advantages of Religious Education Taught in the Concept of Positional Religious Education

The proper and thus advantage of a positional approach to religion in contrast to an approach in the sense of religious studies becomes apparent by taking a look at the following aspects.

Arguing from a religio-theoretical point of view / The religio-theoretical argument: The subject area of Religious Education – depending on various verbalizations in the educational schemes of the different federal states and governments in Europe – defines a critical examination of religion in a way that students “can understand religion” (Jackson 2014) as central. This means that gaining an under-

standing of religion eventually enables students to develop their own position towards religion and become thus “educated in religion” (cf. Benner 2014).

If religion is the main topic of Religious Education, it is an obligation to show off the peculiarity of religion (Schambeck 2013). Religion itself does not exhaust itself in the description as a system of discourse. It also entails an existential dimension meaning that religion always “concerns” human beings. Therefore, in order to impart religion authentically, taking into account its characteristic qualities, it is necessary to showcase religion as a life-concept and further to illustrate the multidimensionality of religion (the subjective and objective dimension of religion in its existential dimension as well as its expressive dimension). The so-called religio-theoretical argument argues for the concept of positional religious education in contrast to the concept of religious studies.

Arguing from an education-theoretical point of view / The education-theoretical argument: This means however, that we need a narrator or communicator who knows how to approach and how to deal with religion from a first person perspective (I.U. Dalferth). This is largely the task of the teacher. If the teacher functions as a narrator of religion, he/she prevents a reduction of religion to cognition, esthetics or ethics as distinguished from religious studies. Students – no matter if they are rooted in faith or not, if they regard themselves as religious or not – can only deal with religion in a way that allows them to achieve their own well-founded position if they are given the possibility to deal with the multidimensionality of religion.

As a result, positional Religious Education which addresses religion authentically as (the teacher’s own) conviction about life allows an approach to religion in public schools that lives up to the subject – religion itself. Beyond that it also answers the educational responsibility of school which involves students in a critical examination of religion as a phenomenon that influences and affects society in many important ways.

Arguing from a hermeneutic point of view / The hermeneutic argument: However, a natural question to ask would be whether this examination could take place within the scope of a multi-faith approach. After all, this approach, beginning with the students and their search for orientation and identity, aims at introducing religion in its diversity with its many potentials of interpretation. The first answer to this question has to be yes. These objectives of the multi-faith approach are the same as the aims of positional Religious Education. In school, religion is not addressed for its own sake, but rather to make its enormous potential of interpretation and of action available to students in order to enable them to see these potentials in the light of their own life questions and eventually also to evaluate these potentials. Nevertheless, positional religious education does not share the hermeneutic premises given by the multi-faith approach. Hence, the second answer must be that the multi-faith approach is not sufficient. But what is meant by that?

The multi-faith approach starts from the hermeneutic assumption that in a very same teaching-learning setting, one and the same teacher is able to introduce every

religion in its distinctive property to the students in the same good manner. As a consequence, the multi-faith approach implicitly assumes that there is an Archimedean, transcultural and trans-religious point from which it is possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of religion.

There are strong reasons not only to abandon this kind of universal-hermeneutic position but also to reveal this assumption as problematic (cf. similar Jeanrond 2011). Wherever particularity, history and context is classified as minor and wherever a concept of religion is thought as a-historical and a-cultural, differences and diversity, the unknown and the foreign inevitably have to be minimized or respectively abandoned. History offers quite many attempts which culminated in the totalitarianisms of National Socialism, Stalinism and Maoism. Today we find these attempts in the form of dog-eat-dog capitalism and the form of Islamism that distorts the actual face of Islam.

In contrast, the concept of positional Religious Education chooses a rather modest and sensible starting point which attaches greater weight to the aspect of particularity. It acknowledges the contextuality and cultural conditioning of thinking and thus of the very own perspective.

In this respect, talking about religion, means to talk from the background of *one* particular religious tradition which then allows to actually speak from a first person perspective of this particular religion. This perspective is necessary for an approach that goes beyond the approach of religious studies or of sociology. Consequently, the concept of positional religious education fundamentally differs from the multi-faith approach with regard to its hermeneutic premises, even though it shares many objectives with it.

Some might discount this as a so-called glass bead game of academic discussions meaning that this discussion displays a pure intellectual game which lacks an actual purpose for practice. However, the consequences of denying historicity and contextuality may serve as an example of the difficulties that come with such reasoning.

Apart from that, even advocates of the multi-faith approach themselves see this problem for some time past. The discussion about the question “Can I teach Your Religion?” basically addresses the same concern. The core issue of the debate is whether it is possible to abstract from one’s own position – although this position might be religiously independent – and to dive into the existential dimension of other religions in order to be able to teach these religions in an appropriate way? (Schreiner 2000)

Finally, however, the quality of the various concepts of Religious Education, which of course includes the concept of mystagogical learning, is heavily dependent on the students’ and teachers’ valuation of the concept. This question has hardly played any role so far, neither in this article, nor in the various reflections on different directions of Religious Education in general. Therefore, the last part of

this article wants to contribute to this debate by pointing out some of the first peculiarities of the current research project.

4 The Role of the Existential Dimension in Religious Education: Again Some Spotlights

In a lesson with students of the seventh grade the teacher pointed out psalm 18 and especially the verse: “He (the Lord) brought me out into a broad place”. In the arrangement there was the possibility to experience broadness and also narrowness in various manners. At first the students could step out in a vast field – marked by thick ropes – and then they could feel how difficult it is to deal with a very limited space. After further work phases – including music and pictures – the students reflected upon where they have experienced vastness and narrowness in their own lives. There are two examples, what the students noted:

Student 1:

I hadn't used this sentence before, ever. But I think, that the psalmist intends to express that one is saved out of a precarious situation. And is therefore able to flee into freedom.

Student 2:

*When there was a bad time
in my life,
and I didn't feel like doing anything,
I sometimes
prayed to God
for helping me to
escape my grief.
And then I've [✠] by God managed
to go on
and to pick myself up.*

The students dealt with the task very diversely: The first, who had never used the sentence before, connected the phrase in a very intuitive way with difficult situations in his own life. The second student transferred the phrase into her life and connected it to her own sufferings, as well as her personal experiences of liberation. Furthermore, she connected these experiences with God. She did this – although it had not been a part of the assignment.

As different as those two examples may be – and there are many more – they demonstrate, that if Religious Education gives the possibility to open the room for

personal experiences, it is very likely that students are ready to accept these invitations and to reflect them in relation to their own life.

In empirical studies – which are still in their beginnings – I asked students what they think about such lessons. Answers such as “I like them because they are more personal and we could reflect on our own life” are quite numerous.

I think that this point is valid enough to re-think and re-form Religious Education – also in school – and to put a stronger emphasis on learning arrangements that focus on the existential dimension of belief.

Perhaps these illustrations of students may be the key to objective the debate about the positional RE and the multi-faith approach, which also transport the labels of “conservative” and progressive. If this is the case, it will be worth to matter.

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