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The Media Culture Approach to Religious Education.
An Outline with a Focus on Interreligious Learning

1. The media culture approach to RE –
an illustrative introduction

In her famous bestselling book, 'The Best Christmas Pageant Ever', Barbara Robinson tells the story of the Herdmans, the 'absolutely worst kids in the history of the world' (Robinson 1972, 1), who nevertheless are supposed to take part in this year's Christmas pageant. However, as they have never heard the biblical Christmas story, it has to be read out to them and some other children by the mother of one of the latter.

> *"And, lo, the Angel of the Lord came upon them," Mother went on, "and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and –"*
> *"Batman!¹" Gladys (Herdman) yelled, flinging her arms out and smacking the kid next to her.*
> *"What?" Mother said. Mother never read "Amazing Comics".*
> *"Out of the black night with horrible vengeance came Batman –"*
> *"I don't know what you're talking about, Gladys," Mother said. "This is the Angel of the Lord who comes to the shepherds in the fields, and –"*
> *"Out of nowhere, right?" Gladys said. "In the black night, right?"*
> *"Well …" Mother looked unhappy. "In a way."*
> *So Gladys sat back down, looking very satisfied, as if this was at least one part of the Christmas story that made sense to her.*

This fictional episode illustrates nicely what is a frequent experience in 'real-life' RE classes: A lot of children and youngsters today lack basic knowledge of religious traditions, and when they encounter religious figures and stories they make sense of them from the background of their experiences with media figures and stories which are so familiar to them. Sociological and educational studies point out that the socialisation of young people in modern western societies is to a considerable extent media socialisation (Süss 2004; Fritz 2003), and that their life world ('Lebenswelt') is very much a media world (Anfang 2003). Consequently, the media influence their way of looking at the world and understanding it. That this also goes for their understanding of religion can be supported by empirical evidence from several studies on the religious ideas and attitudes of children and adolescents. These show, for instance, that children use pictures from cowboy or war films to

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1   I have substituted the name „Batman" from the German version of the book for the original American version's „Shazzam", a comics figure less well known nowadays and outside the U.S.

draw their image of God (Hanisch 1996, 128), refer to ghost films when they try to express their idea of life after death (Freudenberger-Loetz 2006, 187) or tend to believe more in the existence of supernatural powers when they are mystery-film fans (Pirner 2004, 59).

A first and minimal consequence that can be drawn from these findings for religious education processes is that teachers should be aware of these preconditions for pupils' religious learning and take them into account. Of course the way in which Gladys "understands" a part of the Christmas story can be viewed as being problematic. However, looking at the Herdman episode more closely, it becomes clear, that Gladys' association of Batman with the Christmas angel is not entirely incidental. As is well known, Batman –just as his 'brothers' Superman, Spiderman or He-Man– is not just a secular comics or film figure but has himself quasi-religious dimensions: with the help of supernatural powers he continually rescues good from evil and eventually, almost sacrificing his own life, saves the world. In this light, it seems that Gladys' way of understanding the Christmas angel in analogy to Batman was not that misleading. And numerous hermeneutic and analytical studies from various scholarly disciplines over the past decades have shown that the Batman figure is only one of many examples of religious or quasi-religious elements and structures in popular media culture (overview: Pirner 2003). To be sure, young people's media socialisation will certainly change and influence their perception of religion in many ways, irrespective of the presence of religious or quasi-religious elements in the media – but this presence can be expected to have an especially strong and specific impact on the development of their religious ideas and attitudes.

As we have seen, Gladys' media experience helped her to make some sense of the Christmas story, which otherwise obviously would have remained completely strange and boring to her. Again this illustrates an experience from RE lessons such as Jürgen K. Schulze reports it (Schulze 1988, 148f.). In the course of talking about the biblical book of Job conversation in his RE class proceeded in a halting and difficult manner until one student mentioned that Job's situation for him resembled the situation of Father Ralph de Bricassart in the TV series 'The Thorn Birds' (ABC, U.S. 1983). As many other students had also seen the film series, classroom discussion started to liven up and, as Schulze reports, eventually led to a better understanding of the Job story. The example demonstrates that sometimes references to media culture can work like a catalyst for religious communication and religious learning processes. In this sense, it would seem advisable for an RE teacher not only to be aware of his students' possible media experiences as a precondition for religious learning, but also to encourage them to contribute these experiences to classroom discussions and, moreover, for the teacher to use elements from popular media culture reflectively in order to promote learning processes in RE.

This is what, for instance, Matthias Everding tried to do by integrating pop songs into RE lessons (Everding 2000). He points out that well-chosen pop songs can be helpful for overcoming communication problems in RE. According to his diagnosis, these communication problems come about because the teacher is not familiar with the language (and culture) of adolescents, while on the other hand

most of them are not familiar with religious or theological language. It seems that elements from popular media culture such as pop songs can function like a *lingua franca*, a common language which helps RE teachers and their students to communicate about religious topics. A precondition, of course, would be that the RE teacher shows interest in and acquires knowledge about the media culture which his or her students are exposed to and absorb. And it also requires the RE teacher to attain some expertise in the hermeneutics of popular culture which can help him discover and understand those of its elements that carry a productive potential for religious learning – just as he or she acquired expertise in biblical or religious hermeneutics.

2. The media culture approach to RE – theoretical perspectives

These illustrating examples, which I could have amplified from my own classroom experience, can illuminate the main theoretical concepts of the Media Culture Approach to RE. The examples can also indicate that I do not claim to have invented a completely new approach, but have rather tried over the past years to underpin, reflect on, research and provide new impulses to what I and others have discovered as a working practice in RE at German schools (cf. e.g. Pirner 2001, 2002a, 2004, 2005a, 2006a, 2006b; Buschmann & Pirner 2003; Pirner & Rath 2003; Pirner & Breuer 2004). And I have been able to learn from and exchange ideas with other German RE theorists concerned with this area (e.g. Gutmann 1998; Heimbrock 1998; Beuscher 1999).

On a *sociological level* the Media Culture Approach is critical of *radical* secularization theories and rather relies on transformation theories of religion (cf. Crippen 1988, Gräb 2006). Comics figures such as Batman or Superman, the mythic structures of so many Hollywood films and computer games, religious symbols in pop music clips and commercials, etc. indicate that elements from religious traditions have found their way into popular media culture in a transformed shape. The transformation view of religion in western societies is supported by hermeneutical and empirical studies on 'civil religion' (Bellah), 'cultural religion' (Albanese 1982, 322), 'implicit religion' (Bailey, cf. Thomas 2001, Schnell 2004) or 'media religion' (Schilson 1997, Gräb et al. 2006; overview: Pirner 2006d). Transformation theories draw mainly on functional and structural, sociological and phenomenological, mostly multidimensional concepts of religion (e.g. Kaufmann 1989; Smart 1973; Polak 2002), identifying phenomena which either evidently come directly from religious traditions or show significant similarities and analogies to religious phenomena. Transformation theories of religion do not deny the decreasing importance of traditional institutional religion in western societies (secularization). Neither do they contradict the view that religion is undergoing processes of pluralization and individualization, but they concentrate on the often neglected presence of transformed fragments, structures and elements of religion in diverse cultural realms which can be seen as part and consequence of such processes. In doing so,

they also correct the possible overestimation of the scale of secularization, pluralization and individualization of religion in western societies.

The *concept of popular media culture* uses the well-established notion of 'popular culture' in which *'culture'* is understood largely in the line of anthropological concepts favoured by the British and American Cultural Studies as a 'web of significance' (Clifford Geertz, cf. Mazur & McCarthy 2001, 5) including all the typical ways and mechanisms within a society by which people 'make sense of our world' (Turner 2003, 12) and which connect human thought and behaviour.

The notion of *'popular'* refers to the success which a cultural product has among the 'mass' of the population or a considerable part of it. It should be noted here that popular culture is not naively taken to be the source of an authentic expression of the common folk or of the authentic language of those young people sitting in our RE classes. However, I follow the empirically-backed Cultural Studies view that even though popular culture is industrially produced, exploitative and largely controlled by the dominant culture, it necessarily maintains a connection to its audience's needs and desires 'and therefore its products can tell us something authentic about that audience' (Mazur & McCarthy 2001, 8). Taking additionally into account the active and constructive role of the media users, a factor supported and emphasized by most recent media effect studies (cf. Schenk 2002), we must evidently view popular culture not just as a one-way street of indoctrination but rather as an area which includes certain spaces of freedom for negotiating meaning, developing autonomy and even for resisting materialistic capitalist ideology. The Media Culture Approach to RE affords a particular opportunity to support students in developing an autonomous and critical stance towards the media – which is in fact quite in line with general media education efforts at schools.

The term *'media'* in 'popular media culture' is intended to emphasize the electronic media and the dominant role they play in young people's lives in western societies. In my own studies in the context of the Media Culture Approach to RE I have up to now concentrated on TV –still the most important medium for children and adolescents– and movie films (2001), pop music (1999, 2002b, 2003b), commercials (Buschmann & Pirner 2003) and computer games (2005b).

On the *level of socialisation theory* the sociological perspectives imply that young people even in widely secularized western societies like that in Germany, and even from non-religious families, are not completely untouched by the realm of religion, because they constantly encounter fragments and transformations of religious traditions and themes in popular media culture. If socialisation in western societies today is to a considerable extent media socialisation, and if media culture contains and transports transformations of 'religion', it seems appropriate to speak of a kind of *religious media socialisation* ("Religiöse Mediensozialisation", cf. Pirner 2004) – always keeping in mind that socialisation should be seen as an interactive process.[2] Using the sociological distinction between institutional religion, pri-

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2   Cf. e.g. Klaus Hurrelmann's definition of socialization as 'the process of generation and development of the human personality depending on and interacting with the social and material life conditions' in a certain society (Hurrelmann 1995, 114; my translation).

vate religion and public religion (cf. e.g. Rössler 1994, 78), the Media Culture Approach argues that RE in Germany for a long time only concentrated on young people's deficits in institutional (church-related) religion, thus perceiving them mainly as 'secularized' kids, and did not realize the extent of their socialisation by public religion – which means, to a large degree, religion in popular media culture.

However, this socialising presence of 'media religion' in young people's lives can be seen as ambivalent: 'Media religion' may work either as a substitute for ('real' or traditional) religion – which would classically be interpreted as a secularizing effect – or as a bridge to ('real' or traditional) religion. There is a wide consensus among recent media effect studies that it is the social context even more than the concrete form and content of media reception that determines media effects. Consequently, the Media Culture Approach to RE sees its chance in offering a social and learning context to the students in which their media experiences can be reflectively integrated into religious education processes and for which useful examples from media culture can be chosen to promote religious learning. In this way, the various forms of 'religion' (or religion-related elements) in popular media culture can help to disclose to schoolchildren what religion is all about and give them a better understanding of religious traditions. And, in turn, bringing media symbols, stories and performances to bear on religious traditions can help young people to better understand the function, forms and contents of media culture, perhaps eventually even to better grasp the central issues of human existence. Media culture can also provide elements of a widely common (mostly symbolic) language which can be used in RE classes to communicate about religious topics and which can help to introduce the students to traditional religious language. Thus, the Media Culture Approach seems to be one possible and promising way for RE to address young people in a largely secularized and pluralistic world.

The question, however, is whether this approach mainly works for those young people without close bonds to any traditional religion or also for those who do have certain religious backgrounds. And the question is whether it works mainly in the German context, in which RE is still almost exclusively monoreligious and denominational (mainly Protestant or Catholic RE, partly also Islamic and Jewish RE) or whether it can also be useful within a multi-faith concept of RE. Can popular media culture promote *interreligious* communication and learning, too? In order to approach an answer to these questions I will first sketch some empirical findings on the role of media culture in the process of intercultural understanding and learning.

3. Popular media culture as a lingua franca for intercultural learning? – some empirical findings

As there are – to my knowledge – as yet no studies on media culture and *interreligious* learning, I will instead present some research findings on media culture and *intercultural* learning and on media use by young people with migrant backgrounds

in Germany, which I hope will shed some light on the issue of interreligious learn-
ing as well.

Two aspects should be distinguished in this context even though they have be-
come increasingly intertwined: 1) Intercultural (and interreligious) learning can
mean learning that relates to other cultures and religions *in other countries;* it then
refers to *international or global* diversity. 2) Intercultural (and interreligious) learn-
ing can have to do with encountering people from different cultural and religious
backgrounds *within one's own country or region*; it then refers to *diversity in a na-
tional or regional context.* Obviously, it is the latter aspect which has over the re-
cent years become the major concern of many European countries, as the number
of immigrants or young people with a 'migration background' has increased and
has thus resulted in more multicultural and multireligious societies.

With regard mainly to the first aspect, two international studies were conducted
by a group of scholars including my Ludwigsburg colleague Professor Horst Nie-
syto. The project 'VideoCulture', running from 1997 to 2001, explored the poten-
tial of audio-visual media-production as a means of intercultural communication
(cf. Niesyto 2001, 2003; Niesyto, Buckingham and Fisherkeller 2003). Groups of
young people in Germany, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Britain and the U.S. pro-
duced videos, exchanged them and interpreted each others' productions. One of the
central aims of the research was to discover whether there were any forms of trans-
cultural audio-visual language in these productions. The videos were not intended
to impart information but should mainly express emotions, moods, experiences and
fantasies, emphasizing a 'presentative' and 'symbolic' kind of communication
rather than representative verbal language. Using methods such as open question-
naires, group discussions and multimedia questionnaires, the case studies show that
the young people were on the whole indeed able to communicate successfully
across different cultures by video language. One important factor for this success is
seen by Niesyto in the use of 'styles of symbolisation which clearly refer to global
media cultures …This mainly applies to the use of popular music, as well as the
imitation of genre-patterns known from Hollywood movies and video clips. Within
the constraints of the situation, the young people tried to make use of these 'third
cultures' in order to express their individual concerns and their feelings about life.'
(Niesyto 2001, 220). However, some groups also had problems in understanding
the other groups' video productions, and in one instance the close imitation of
models from global or American media culture was even criticized as being 'dull'
and 'implausible' (Niesyto 2001, 222). Apparently, the adolescents expected a cer-
tain degree of authenticity in audio-visual expression from their distant partners.

The second research project was called CHICAM (Children in Communication
about Migration) and ran from 2001 to 2004. Six media clubs for migrant or refu-
gee children (aged 10 to 14) were set up in six European countries: Greece, Italy,
the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany and the UK. Similar to *VideoCulture*, the clubs
made short videos, exchanged them on the internet and tried to interpret them. One
major aim of the project was, 'by enabling such children to communicate with each
other across national boundaries, to identify the potential of these media as means
of intercultural communication, and to investigate how this potential can be more

effectively exploited by educational and cultural organisations' (de Block, Buckingham & Banaji 2005, 26). In the attempt to grasp the children's cultural identity, religion was discovered to be one major factor beside language, food and dress (cf. 15, 17, 35, 69). Again one important question was where the children had acquired the elements of audio-visual language they used in the production for their videos. Investigating into their media uses the study found out that these were 'directly related to the children's social contexts and purposes and can be placed in three different categories: a. diasporic, (where media products from the home country or region are used to maintain cultural, emotional and linguistic links with both the past and current changes occurring in countries of origin); b. national, (where the emphasis is on using media products to facilitate integration, make friends, negotiate new identities and acquire a new language); c. global, which is particularly important for accessing global youth culture as well as news' (93). Most of the children 'listened regularly to both traditional and modern music from their countries of origin. However, global popular music played an important role in building peer connections and was thus their main interest. Television channels such as MTV and music-related web sites were very popular and played a major role in children's media and social lives. Music was the most important point of initial contact between the clubs and was able to cut across language and cultural differences' (93).

The results from the CHICAM study thus not only show that references to the global media culture in the children's videos contributed to a widely successful communication between the clubs across national borders, but also that relating to global as well as national media culture is of significant help for the kids on their route to social integration. It seems that it is precisely the dynamic mixture of global and national media culture and that of their cultures of origin which helps them to develop an identity in their new home country without losing their original identity. Interestingly, this kind of 'syncretistic' mixture sometimes also develops in the religious sphere, as the example of two Syrian Kurdish brothers in Greece show which is reported in the CHICAM study: They 'kept all the Kurdish celebrations but went from door to door to sing traditional Christmas carols' and stated, "We are Muslim but also a bit Christian as well!"'(69).

As to the media use of young people with a migrant background, the CHICAM findings are by and large confirmed by other (German) empirical studies (e.g. Deutsche Shell 2000, MFJFG 2000), which on their part can add some interesting aspects. One is the insight that the pattern of media use and its role within communication and integration processes among young migrants in Germany depends on the specific migration background. For example, adolescents of Polish origin tend to relate strongly to global and western-style media culture while for those with a Turkish background Turkish TV and music remains of some importance (cf. MFJFG 2000, 13), which may have to do with the different religious dimensions of the two groups' cultural origins. Another illuminating finding is that popular media culture in Germany has recently integrated elements from Turkish pop music and films which meanwhile are popular with quite a number of young people of German origin, too (cf. MFJFG 2000, 17).

In a first summarizing evaluation of the empirical findings it can be said that popular media culture, in its more national as well as in its more globalized forms, seems to partly work as a common basis of understanding between young people from different cultures. Although religious aspects remained rather marginal in the reported studies there were hints that this understanding across different cultures includes understanding across different religious orientations –while the young people's original cultures including their religions still remain important to them. It seems, therefore, that popular media culture indeed tends to work as a *lingua franca*, a common cultural language which helps young people from different cultural and religious backgrounds to communicate with each other and integrate themselves into a new social context. I will now take these results as a spur to inquire more theoretically into the possible function of popular media culture for interreligious learning.

4. The triangle of interreligious learning

When it comes to interreligious learning, it appears to me that the dominant paradigm is that of a dialogue between two persons who belong to two different religions. It also seems to be part of the paradigm to tacitly assume that these two persons are well acquainted with their religion – an especially problematic presupposition when it comes to children and adolescents. The question of what constitutes a basis, a common ground or at least a common point of reference for such a process of dialogue usually receives little attention. To conceive of popular media culture as such a helpful common ground, or even a kind of *lingua franca*, would mean to conceptualize interreligious communication and learning not just as a bilateral but as a trilateral process. In modification of Wolfgang Hallet's diagram representing the main factors of bilingual learning (Hallet 1998, 119), I should like to suggest the following 'Triangle of Interreligious Learning' in order to visualize this trilateral concept.
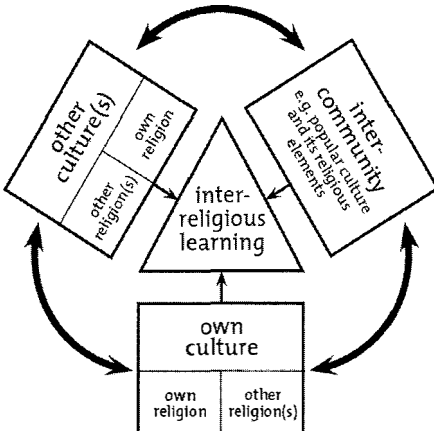

Figure 1:
Triangle of interreligious learning.

By making 'intercommunity' a third field beside 'own culture' and 'other culture(s)' the diagram seeks to include what has been called the basis or common ground or at least a common point of reference for interreligious communication above. It also tries to indicate the interactions between other culture/ other religion, own culture/ own religion and intercommunity. By distinguishing between own religion and own culture and likewise between other religion and other culture, the concept additionally allows a clear perception of the differences as well as the relationships between intercultural learning (i.e. learning about another culture and by way of contrast about one's own culture) and interreligious learning (i.e. learning about another religion and by way of contrast about one's own religion). My hypothesis is that both aspects of learning can be fostered by referring to popular media culture in RE. Saying this, I am far from denying that the direct encounter with (people from) other cultures can lead to mutual understanding and intercultural learning (just as I do not deny that secularized kids can learn about religion by being directly confronted with religious traditions which are strange to them). My point is simply that in some situations and with some issues references to popular media culture can be helpful in support of these ends.

As the empirical findings from VideoCulture and CHICAM suggest, it is mainly the internationalised, globalized part of popular culture which can promote understanding across different cultures. It was also mentioned at the beginning, that religion is transformed when it is adopted and adapted by popular media culture. The critical question which may be raised here is whether this transformation, especially in the global context, does not in fact result in such a distortion and trivialisation of religion (and maybe other human values also) that globalized popular culture cannot be recommended as a helpful didactic element in RE. It seems appropriate therefore to try to understand these globalization and transformation processes better and to this end to discuss this question briefly within the context of the recent globalization debate.

5. Globalization and cultural pluralism within popular media culture

What is the common, internationally intelligible basis of the popular media stories, symbols and performances? In the 1950s myth theorist Joseph Campbell put forward his 'monomyth' hypothesis, which claims that the basic structure of all traditional myths around the world is the same, due to the collective unconscious in every human being: 'A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men.' (Campbell 1973, 30). Campbell and other religious studies scholars such as Mircea Eliade discovered these basic mythical structures in modern media stories as well (cf. Campbell 1973, 25ff. 327ff.; Eliade 1961, 33ff.).

In the 1970s, Robert Jewett and John Lawrence criticised and modified Campbell's theory by speaking of 'The *American* Monomyth' (1977), which according to them is derived mainly from the Judeo-Christian redemption drama and from historical key experiences in the genesis of the North American states. Consequently, the basic myth behind TV series such as 'Star Trek', popular movies such as 'Death Wish' (USA 1974) or Disney's dream worlds would be not universal but culture-specific, mainly contributing to the melting together of the American nation. However, since Jewett and Lawrence's analysis, major media companies have become even more international and global in their marketing strategies and are eager to create media products which appeal to a wide audience all around the world in order to increase their sales figures. In this effort, Campbell's monomyth theory seems to have had a come-back. George Lucas, the inventor of the 'Star Wars' science fiction films, for instance, is known to have relied on Campbell's description of basic intercultural elements of myths when he designed the 'Star Wars' world and story plots. Even manuals for film directors and story writers nowadays recommend as a success principle following the basic universal mythical structures when creating a plot (cf. Wessely 1997, 53).

That this principle works, is exemplarily shown by the success of the 'Star Wars' films up to the present. In 2005, the last of the sequels, 'Episode III – Revenge of the Sith', broke several attendance records in the movies when it started simultaneously in 105 countries of the world.[3] The 'Star Wars' films have been watched by millions of young people of different nationalities, ethnic and religious backgrounds all over the world in the movies as well as on TV. The mythical and religious elements in the stories are quite obvious. For instance, they talk about a supreme god-like 'Force' which determines everything and has a 'light side' and a 'dark side', and the 'Star Wars' protagonists often use the blessing-like wish 'May the Force be with you'. In the light of such globalization strategies in Hollywood films and other media products, it seems that they could indeed serve as a common ground or reference point for religious communication in a world of religious diversity and in religious education processes.

This is underlined in the globalization discussion over the past years, in which the media, together with and in the service of capitalist consumer culture, have been seen as a major factor promoting worldwide interconnectedness (cf. Hepp, Krotz and Winter 2005). 'Events such as the Gulf War; social trends and fashions; and cultural phenomena such as Madonna, rap music, and popular Hollywood films are distributed through global cultural distribution networks and constitute global forms of popular culture.' (Cvetkovich and Kellner 1997, 9). Recently, however, scholars have begun to emphasize that globalization brings about new polarizing effects and a rediscovery of local dimensions in a sometimes rather paradoxical way. Kai Hafez, for instance, points to the fact that Turkish immigrants into Germany used to be restricted to German TV programmes up to the 1980s, while the globalization impact of satellite reception now enables them to watch several Turkish programmes, which may promote their ethnic seclusion and hamper their inte-

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3   Cf. http://www.boxofficemojo.com/news/?id=1826&p=.htm (visited on 30-04-2006).

gration in German society (Hafez 2005, 171). On the whole, the globalization discourse has clearly moved away from pure enthusiasm about the gains toward also realizing the losses, such as alienation, disenchantment, and displacement. 'Stamping out cultural diversity has been a form of disenchantment of the world.' (Pieterse 2004, 41).

We might add here: Stamping out religious diversity would be another severe form of disenchantment of the world. This danger can be seen in two paradigms of globalization which can both be applied to popular media culture. One would be the neo-colonial, hegemonic *domination* of global culture by one particular world view as indicated in the notions of 'Americanization', 'McDonaldization' or 'Westernization'. The Dutch scholar Jan Nederveen Pieterse, certainly, relativizes the reproach by pointing out that American society is one of the most pluralistic and mixed in the world and suggests that this makes for much of the appeal that American popular culture has worldwide. 'In this culture, the grammars of multiple cultures mingle, and this intercultural density may be part of the subliminal attraction of American popular media, music, film, television: the encounter, and often enough the clash, but an intimate clash, of ethnicities, cultures, histories.' (Pieterse 2004, 54). Still, when you skip through the German TV programmes the impression of a certain American domination can hardly be evaded. Concerning religious learning, this may, however even have a positive effect insofar as US-American culture is much more religious than Central European culture. 'In today's American culture, it seems that religion is everywhere', write Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy (2001, 2), and this also affects those American media products which are designed for a global market. Yet, despite Pieterse's analysis of the multicultural character of American popular culture it appears to me to be still dominated by (mainly Protestant) Christianity.

The other paradigm of the danger globalization may bring with it, is precisely the phenomenon appreciated by Pieterse, namely that of *hybridisation*, which means the mixing and mingling of cultural elements that, in a negative perspective, may result in a mish-mash relativizing and minimising cultural profiles. In the religious realm, this would imply syncretistic tendencies and might weaken the meaning and role of specific religions altogether. Perhaps the best recent example of hybridisation or syncretism in the area of popular culture is the film trilogy 'The Matrix' (USA 1999, 2001). Constructed like a modern redemption drama, it contains a great number of allusions to several religious traditions, including Christianity, Buddhism, Greek mythology and Gnostic elements.

However, when we talk about syncretism, it is important to realize that especially for adolescents, as well as other people in transitory situations such as immigrants, a syncretistic construction of their own personal religious views – as it was mentioned in one example from the CHICAM study above – can be a helpful and meaningful phase on their way to further clarification (cf. Siller 1991). Also, a look at some characteristics of the reception process of 'The Matrix' may be illuminating. Although the film-trilogy definitely assembles religious elements in a syncretistic, hybridising and aestheticizing manner, it has triggered interesting discussions about the role of religion in general, and specific religions in particular, in popular

culture and in our western societies. This is why especially Matrix I was extremely popular not only in the movies but also in RE classes in Germany. However, the limits of popular culture as a catalyst for interreligious communication can also be exemplified by 'The Matrix'. When the first of the film trilogy was shown in Egypt, it was criticised by Islamic newspapers for promoting Zionism. The second film, 'The Matrix Reloaded', was banned by Egypt's censorship board because of its violent content and because it tackled 'religious themes'[4] – a fact that seems worth analyzing and discussing in RE classes within the perspective of interreligious learning.

To sum up, in my view, the danger that the rich diversity of religions might suffer from hegemonic or syncretistic tendencies in popular culture is one which should be taken seriously. In line with this demand, one important indispensable aim of the Media Culture Approach to RE, which has already been mentioned above, is to stimulate and support students' *critical* evaluation of what the media do to them, to other humans, to society and our world. Experiences from RE lessons, especially those about religious symbols in advertisements and commercials (cf. Buschmann and Pirner 2003), have encouraged me in the belief that it is possible to combine both aims, to use the medium's aesthetic language to promote religious understanding on the one hand and to discuss critically the functionalisation and transformation of traditional religious symbols by the media on the other. And, just as we can use the English language as a *lingua franca* in international communication and still appreciate our mother tongue, it seems possible to make use of popular media culture in interreligious learning without losing or neglecting the cultural, regional and local profile of specific religions but rather in a way which helps us and our students to gain new and diverse paths of access to them.

6. Conclusion

Can popular media culture promote intercultural and interreligious learning by serving as a common ground, as a *lingua franca* or a common point of reference for religious education in a world of religious diversity? I have advanced a number of arguments, empirical evidence and a theoretical framework which, I believe, makes it plausible to answer this question in the affirmative. It has been shown that in the view of media theories as well as of cultural, religious studies, sociological and globalization theories, the media are perceived to play a central role for communicating and constituting cultural identity in western societies in general and for young people's socialization in particular. The Media Culture Approach to RE builds on this fact and on the insight in the various links between media culture and religion, arguing that young people's media experiences inevitably influence religious education processes and should therefore not only be taken into account but should be seen as an opportunity for religious learning. The empirical findings as well as the theoretical discussions around globalization both indicated that this op-

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4   Cf. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/film/2980432.stm (visited on 30-04-2006).

portunity must be carefully and critically explored and that the risks of hegemonic, syncretistic and particularistic trends within popular culture should be addressed with well-reflected and empirically tested pedagogical and didactic concepts.

It is in this area of the concrete classroom processes where research has yet to be done. What has also become quite clear from the presentation of empirical studies in the field of intercultural learning is the fact that religious aspects still tend to be neglected or downplayed in such studies, just as they are in the intercultural education discourse in general (cf. Jackson 2004; Pirner 2006c). More investigations into the specific relationship of religious orientation and media use would probably prove to be extremely helpful in clarifying basic preconditions for media education as well as religious education.

One issue which has gained clearer contours and increased urgency when looking at young people with migrant backgrounds is that of the relationship between the 'old' (mostly religious) traditions and 'modern' media culture. The general objective of RE to help students to 'link' religion and their own modern world and develop an appreciating stance toward religion becomes an even more pressing and meaningful task with migrant biographies. To put it as a question: How can young people with a migrant background be supported in finding ways to hold on to their 'old' religious traditions and at the same time open up to the 'new' modern (media) world which they encounter and which helps them to integrate themselves into society? The educational strategy of the Media Culture Approach to RE to initiate mutual disclosures between religion and the media seems to be a promising approach precisely with this group of students.

Having started with Batman and the fictional Herdman story, I should like to finish off with Superman and a real-life documentation taken from John Hull's book 'God-Talk with Young Children', which shows impressively in what way religious learning can profit from referring to popular media culture (Hull 1991).

> *Father (following a discussion about Superman): Who can jump higher, God or Superman?*
> *First Child (5 years): God.*
> *Second Child (6 ½ years): Yes, God can jump higher.*
> *Father: But can God jump? What would happen, if he jumped?*
> *Second Child (excited): He would jump into himself. He is there already. He is everywhere.*
> *Father (laughing): So, who can run faster, God or Superman?*
> *Second Child: Superman can run round the word in a millionth second.*
> *Father: And God?*
> *Second Child: He is there already.*
> *Father: That means, however fast Superman is, God is always first, because he is there already.*
> *Second Child: Yes. (laughs with delight)*

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