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2 Principled Pluralism and Theology's Contribution to Religious Education: A Protestant Perspective

The relationship between religious education and theology is considered problematic. Ever since Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* was first published in 1762, many educators have argued against theology as a basis or as a source for religious education. Since the 1960s, there has been a growing debate about whether theology *or* religious studies is the appropriate academic subject or field to which religious education should be related. Consequently, my interest in theology's contribution to religious education will be suspect to many readers from the beginning, especially to those from countries where religious education is based on a multifaith approach, such as England and Wales, or on a so-called scientific approach to the study of religion, as in Sweden. This is why I want to start out with a number of clarifications about what theology should and should not be in religious education.

However, this question will only be treated in a preliminary way here. My main argument is not about the relationship between religious education and theology in general. Instead, my focus is on the situation of religious pluralism, including the corresponding challenges of relativism and fundamentalism. In my understanding, religious education will not be able to face up to this situation unless it is prepared to deal with competing contradictory religious truth-claims. In this respect, it is certainly the case that teaching religion and questions of truth must be closely interconnected, as suggested by the title of the present book. Yet how should religious education actually deal with competing truth-claims? And what, if anything, might theology have to contribute to this task?

In other words, I am interested in the relationship between the self-understanding of religion and religious education. Consequently, I must

also be clear about my own theological self-understanding. My background is Protestant Christianity and religious education (cf. Schweitzer, 2006a). Since I clearly cannot speak for other religions or even for other Christian denominations (as a Protestant I do not expect, for example, the Pope to agree with me, and neither do I feel obliged to agree with him), I want to be open about my Protestant point of view from the beginning. This point of view is not meant to be exclusive, but naturally it implies a number of presuppositions that others might not share.

In relationship to religious education, I want to be specific as well. It is easy to see that there are many different educational situations and challenges perceived by today's educators around the world. For the present purposes, I will refer to a western context that is characterized by plurality or pluralism, in the sense of the co-presence of different cultures and different religions or worldviews (cf. Osmer and Schweitzer, 2003). It is against this background of multicultural and multireligious societies that I will be considering the role of theology in relationship to religious education.

What theology should and should not be in religious education

It would be an interesting enterprise to study the different references to theology in twentieth-century religious education, a task that, unfortunately, cannot be fulfilled here (interesting starting points for such a study would be the different publications in the *British Journal of Religious Education* over the years, for example, Ballard, 1966; Netto, 1989; Cush, 1999; Hull, 2004, articles that I have consulted in preparing this chapter). Yet a few remarks that indicate my own understanding are in place. Since space does not allow for fully referencing the discussion on theology in relationship to religious education here, I want at least to refer readers to some publications that can be consulted for additional references (cf. Nipkow, 1985; Herms,

1995; Schwöbel, 2003; Rothgangel and Thaidigsmann, 2005; Schweitzer, 2006c; Schweitzer and Schwöbel, 2007). A broader analysis of the present topic would also have to include the different theological traditions that are, at least in some cases, also related to different countries, regions, or denominations (cf. Miller, 1995), but can also be specific to a certain religion, for example, to Islam (Aslan, 2009).

The contemporary situation includes a number of apprehensions and suspicions that should be addressed openly.

Quite often, educators seem to equate theology with some kind of Christian imperialism. Traditionally, as in the case of Rousseau, the suspicion of imperialism referred to the dominance of theology over education. Today, it is directed to the dominance of Christianity over other religions and worldviews. In my own understanding, however, theology is a generic term used for the reflexive understanding of a certain faith and religious tradition, necessarily including – although not limited to – an inside perspective that tries to do justice to the truth-claims of the particular faith. This distinctive characteristic refers to the difference between theology and a religious studies approach that often defines itself exactly by referring to an outside perspective irrespective of the possible truth of a faith (for the corresponding discussion within British religious education, see Copley, 1997, 83, referring to the influence of Ninian Smart: 'The study of religion is strategic to some of the human sciences. It has a broad base and does not make the truth assumptions made by theology'). It should be noted that this self-definition of religious studies is not necessarily shared by theology, at least not in respect to its implications for theology. According to its self-definition, theology often includes outside perspectives as well. Moreover, especially in the present context, theology should not be identified with Christianity. It can be Christian but can also be Muslim or Jewish, etc., provided it includes the inside perspective of the respective faith. Given today's situation, at least in western countries, it should also be obvious that, especially in the context of the state school, theology and the philosophy of education must be partners in dialogue, without any attempt at unilateral domination.

It is also important to be clear that theology cannot be identified with dogmatics and even less with dogmatism. Dogmatics can be one of the

theological sub-disciplines but it is not altogether the same as theology. Modern theology is open to different methodologies and epistemologies – historical methods as well as social scientific methods, etc. Like law, it is a normative discipline that works from certain normative or credal presuppositions – the inside perspective mentioned above – but this does not mean that these presuppositions must prevent interdisciplinary partnerships, cooperation, or open dialogue.

While there is no full agreement on the nature of theology even within Christian theology, it is at least widely accepted that theology must be clearly distinguished from religion. Religion is a form of life whereas theology is an academic enterprise, at least in one of its meanings that is most pertinent for the present context. As such, it is related to lived religion in a complex manner, bound to a certain faith yet also to general academic standards. This is why theology is always one or several steps removed from lived religion. Without this distance to lived religion, no academic freedom would be possible.

In a different sense, theology can also mean the ways of making sense of one's faith or religion that are not limited to any academic setting. Sometimes such attempts are called lay theology or ordinary theology (Astley, 2002), as opposed to academic theology. According to this understanding, this kind of theology is present in any human context, in education as well as in the everyday life of the people who are thinking about themselves and about their lives.

The interest in children's theology that has emerged in recent years (Bucher, et al., 2002; Schweitzer, 2006b; Iversen, Mitchell, and Pollard, 2009) can be considered a variety of lay theology or of ordinary theology. The term refers to children's ways of making sense of their faith, of religious images, and of religious ideas that they produce themselves or that they encounter. The reference to children's theology parallels the recent advocacy of children's spirituality (Erricker and Erricker, 2000). In both cases, educators advocate the position that children should not be offered some adult theology boiled down to miniature size, but their own ways of making sense of things by themselves should be respected.

While these considerations could open up a whole discussion on many different ways for relating theology to religious education, the present

chapter is focused on theology as a reflexive, most often academic enterprise, and on the context of religious pluralism. Readers should not forget, however, that this enterprise has its roots in everyday life, with ordinary people and not only with academics who consider themselves theologians or with the churches and their representatives.

It is against this background that I now turn to some considerations concerning principled pluralism as an aim of religious education.

Principled pluralism as an aim of religious education

A good opportunity for understanding the tasks of contemporary religious education is relating religious education to the religious situation in western societies. For a long time, secularization was considered the basic challenge for contemporary religious education. Religion seemed to be on the wane, due to the forces of rationalization and modernization. This assumption has turned out to be not very realistic. Social scientists have come to doubt even the concept of secularization itself and most of all its scientific value (for example, Berger, 1979; Luckmann, 1991; Luhmann, 2000). The progressive loss of religion this concept implies has certainly not taken place, at least not in the general sense that many analysts had expected (Casanova, 1994; Berger, 1999). Influential philosophers like Jürgen Habermas now diagnose a 'post-secular' situation or society (Habermas, 2002). Others like Hans Joas, a leading sociologist of religion, maintain that even the reference to 'post' – after – secularization is not appropriate because religion has never disappeared, except perhaps in the minds of secularist philosophers (Joas, 2004). In any case, if religion has ever been absent, it now appears to have come back. And no doubt religion is here to stay, with many different facets. There is also wide agreement that religion is far from being beneficial in all cases, and that religious pluralism holds many challenges.

The social scientific successors of secularization theory are the concepts of plurality, pluralization, and pluralism. In my own understanding,

plurality refers to the fact that contemporary societies entail different cultures, religions, and worldviews, and that none of them can claim a synthesizing function or demand an overarching influence, at least not successfully. *Pluralization* refers to the process that brings about plurality. *Pluralism*, finally, means a certain order which implies that the different cultures, religions, worldviews, etc. have reached some kind of coexistence that goes beyond fighting or discriminating against one another. This is certainly true for the understanding of political pluralism as a democratic way of dealing with differences, but I assume that it also makes sense to speak of religious pluralism in this fashion.

It is easy to see that religious pluralism entails special demands on the people who live in a situation of religious plurality. They must be able to come to terms with this plurality without either just taking resort to relativism that does not take the different truth-claims seriously, or by entrenching themselves in fundamentalist positions that do not allow for peaceful relationships with others who do not share the respective convictions. Both relativism and fundamentalism exclude religious pluralism as a dialogical order that makes space for the other without devaluing the differences between religious orientations and convictions.

In my understanding, religious pluralism must be based on clear principles such as dialogue, tolerance, and mutual respect. This is why I refer to *principled pluralism* as the aim of religious education. It is such principles that distinguish this pluralism from relativism because the principles must be defensible. They must be based on grounds that can also be convincing to others, at least potentially. At the same time, these principles must guarantee openness towards others who, explicitly and permanently, do not share one's own convictions.

It is quite obvious, at least to most observers, that such principles supporting the kind of pluralism I have described will not develop automatically, neither with children and adolescents nor with adults. This is why education and religious education are important in this context. In particular, religious education must support the acquisition or development of principles that make religious pluralism possible. Yet how can such principles be identified and what role should theology play in this process?

Pluralism with or without theology?

One of the contested questions about pluralism concerns the possible role of theology in religious education. In many places – for example, in the UK but also in a number of other countries – the transition from a traditional understanding of religious education to a more pluralist understanding has been based on giving up all confessional ties. Accordingly, confessional religious education is now considered monoreligious and monolithic or – to put it differently – confessional religious education is considered anti-pluralist and intolerant, or just like indoctrination (cf. the description by Copley, 1997, 101).

More or less automatically, the transition to the non-confessional and pluralist understanding of religious education seemed to imply as well that there should be no special relationship anymore between religious education and theology. After all, theology most often understands itself as a denominational enterprise that is premised on a certain creed or confession. From this point of view, it was the religious studies approach with its claim to religious neutrality that seemed to offer itself most naturally as a new basis for religious education. As Michael Grimmitt recently put it, there is no need for theology in religious education, at least not in the UK (Grimmitt, 2008, 274; Grimmitt also mentions others in the United Kingdom who would not agree with him on this issue).

As the title of this chapter indicates, I want to challenge this apparently natural fit between religious education and religious studies. My critical argument proceeds in two steps. First, I want to point out a number of weaknesses of the combination of religious education and religious studies from an educational point of view, and second, I want to present some perspectives from a Protestant theological point of view. I start with the educational perspective in order to make clear that what is at stake is not some kind of confessional or church-related interest but a general educational problem.

(1) From an educational point of view, the detachment of religious education from theology comes at a high price. It entails the following disadvantages.

(a) *No exposure to the internal or inside perspective of religions and, consequently, no opportunity to learn how to balance internal and external perspectives.* As pointed out above, theology is based on the internal perspective of faith which it develops and systematizes academically, in terms of doctrine and reflexive models. Yet from early on, Christian theology has also included external perspectives, for example, by making use of the Greco-Roman philosophical concept of *logos* in the first Christian centuries or, in later times, by pursuing the dialogue with different kinds of philosophy, anthropology, and with the social sciences as well as with natural science. Today, at least for Protestant theology, the constant interplay between internal and external perspectives is a basic requirement, especially in the areas of systematic and practical theology (a branch of theology that has only been developed to a very limited degree, for example, in the UK). Contrary to this, religious studies most often limits its approaches to the perspective of the outsider. At least according to many representatives of this discipline, the self-understanding of the religious traditions should not play a role for their scientific understanding that must be exclusively explanatory.

Educationally, however, it is the interplay between inside and outside perspectives that is of special importance. The process of education can actually be described as the acquisition of the ability to see oneself from other perspectives, not only those of other individuals but also those of different academic disciplines. Moreover, this process must also entail a balance between the different perspectives. Otherwise education would mean the transformation of human beings into the alloplastic objects of outside perceptions. Both one's own perspective and those of others remain crucial, and both must be brought into a considered balance.

(b) *No connection to the religious bodies, institutions, and communities that make up religious life outside the classroom, and consequently no chance to influence this life.* From its very premises, a religious studies approach will

not be interested in having credibility or even authority with any tradition or community of faith. Such credibility would jeopardize the neutrality and scientific objectivity to which this approach aspires. It is easy to see that religious education would have to pay a high price for making this approach its sole basis. It certainly cannot hope to exert any influence on society beyond the classroom – a disadvantage or concern that is often now addressed in the context of fundamentalism.

(c) *No development of dialogical skills that are based on the encounter between different perspectives in the mode of speaking between you and me as I and Thou.* Dialogue needs difference. It depends on the encounter of persons who hold different perspectives or understandings. Even if some dialogues aim at mutual understanding and the overcoming of differences, true dialogue always presupposes that it must be possible for differences to continue to exist. Dialogue is not the end of difference, and differences should not be the end of dialogue. This is especially true for religious differences that, in many cases, can only be expected to dissolve at the expense of deep convictions. Disputes between different faiths have never been settled by scientific arguments. Any approach that does not make space for lasting differences falls short of the task of dialogical education.

(d) *No access to the values embodied in religious traditions that are intrinsically connected to the respective convictions and, consequently, no opportunities really to learn 'from' such traditions.* There is wide agreement in the religious education discussion over the last thirty years that it has been an important achievement to overcome a sterile 'learning about' approach. This approach turned religious education into a prolonged visit to a museum of dead objects on display, or into a rote learning enterprise like the geography classes of the past that tended to cover one country after another applying a set scheme of information. Yet the progression to 'learning from' religion has not really achieved a clear stance towards the need to include the internal perspective of faith and theology. But how can anyone learn from religion if the inner convictions and the values connected to them are methodically excluded? If theology is the reflexive understanding of a certain faith and religious tradition, it holds much potential for learning

'from' a religion or tradition. In fact, any approach to a religion that systematically neglects its reflexive expressions is necessarily incomplete, and must therefore be considered one-sided and questionable. Education is not allowed to present a distorted image of reality to students which intentionally leaves out certain parts or aspects of this reality because these aspects are considered, for example, old-fashioned and dated.

(e) *No access to whatever critical reflexivity religious traditions may have developed internally, consequently a limitation to external critical reflexivity.* There are many examples of the failure of well meant attempts to introduce enlightenment, democracy, or human rights by forcing them on people from the outside. Typically the result of such attempts has been, for example, less tolerance rather than more, because the people subjected to the imperialism of western democracy and values felt threatened in their cultural and religious identities. This is why it is so important to find access to whatever critical reflexivity religious traditions may have developed internally through their different religious traditions – in order to build upon this reflexivity without alienating people. The attempt to identify the religious roots of tolerance carried out in conversation between different religions is a good example of this (Schwöbel and von Tippelskirch, 2002).

(2) To these educational disadvantages, I want to add the following theological shortcomings of an approach to religious education detached from theology.

(a) *Interreligious relationships cannot be comprehended from a God perspective that is superior to the other religious faiths.* This is a crucial point especially for Protestant theology that holds a general scepticism vis-à-vis so-called pluralist theologies of religion. Since faith is about ultimate matters and beliefs, there can be no superior point of view above the different faiths. At least from a religious point of view, such a super perspective is not convincing. This is why pluralist models implying some kind of relativizing judgement of religious differences are not very attractive theologically. They seem to be premised either on a super ethics (as in the case of Hans Küng's global ethics – Küng, 1990) or on some kind of super epistemology

(as in the case of John Hick's philosophical scepticism – Hick, 1996) that allow for defining the place of religious ideas. It is quite possible to consider religion from a moral point of view, but it remains equally possible to consider ethics from a religious point of view. The same applies to the relationship between theology and the philosophy of religion. Again, there should be dialogue in place of the claim to superiority.

(b) *Interreligious relationships should not be limited to ethics or to political demands but should include the attempt of understanding the other's faith.* Modern democracies are premised on religious freedom. This premise includes the limitation of state power in the realm of religion. Consequently, the state or the state school cannot have the right to demand or to enforce anything concerning matters of faith. Instead, the relationship between different denominations and religions should be based on religious beliefs rather than on state imposed ethical or political demands. This is also why it should include the attempt to understand the other's faith, as a presupposition for mutuality. Again, in terms of religious education, this implies that any limitation to an outside perspective must be challenged. The exclusion of religious truth-claims and their theological explanation or defence cannot lead to true dialogue.

(c) *The Protestant understanding of certainty in faith entails the view that this certainty is not the result of human decision-making, but is based on the experience of being granted certainty as a gift. The same is assumed for other faiths, so that religious pluralism is a necessity and cannot be overcome through the appeal to any objective prior-to-faith perspective.* The understanding that faith must be granted and that the certainty of faith is not a human achievement is a core conviction of Protestant theology that can already be found with the sixteenth-century reformers. It also excludes, from the beginning, any kind of 'teaching into' religion approach. Contrary to Roman Catholicism, faith can never be an aim of education in the Protestant understanding. This is why the identification of a Protestant confessional approach with indoctrination does not make much sense. From a Protestant perspective, indoctrination can never be accepted. Faith and indoctrination cannot go together, at least not theologically. If it can be shown that certain Protestant

religious educators teach into the Christian faith, they must be criticized theologically – as well as educationally – for this attempt. It has taken Protestants a long time, however, to realize that the Protestant understanding of faith must also lead to a positive attitude towards pluralism. Only recently has the Protestant rejection of pluralism, as an external imposition that should be criticized or rejected, been overcome by the new perspective of a plea for pluralism based on the internal demands of faith itself (Herms, 1995; Schwöbel, 2003).

In this section, I have limited myself to theological views of religious education which means identifying theological demands on religious education. Yet it is clear that we must also consider the reverse perspective. What are the educational demands on theology?

Educational demands on theology

The considerations of why theology may have to play an important role for religious education in plural situations entail far-reaching implications for theology itself. In other words, not all kinds of theology will be suitable for the tasks and purposes described above. In a similar vein, for example, the German philosopher of education, Dietrich Benner, one of the leading representatives of this field in Germany, is in favour of relating religious education to theology. At the same time, he speaks of the need for non-fundamentalist approaches to religion as a presupposition for their integration in education (Benner, 2008).

In my own work, I refer to the following tasks that theology must fulfil in the context of religious education (for a general background, cf. Schweitzer, 2006a). Theology must be able to afford believers with a language and with concepts that can enable them to participate in dialogue across different cultures and different religions. In the first place, religious language is directed at insiders. It develops in the context of religious practice, ritual, and narrative. This implies that the ability to be in conversation

about religious matters with outsiders requires additional skills at the interface between internal and external communication. If theology should be used for developing such skills, it must itself hold the potential of communicating with others that are not part of one's own community of faith, which is not automatically the case. A theology that only aims for discourse within one's own community falls short of the demands of education.

Moreover, religious traditions are not automatically supportive of tolerance and they do not develop dialogical attitudes and skills by themselves. This is why we need a theology that operates as the reflexive attempt of making sense of religious beliefs in the context of today's world. This kind of theology can only be developed in dialogue with different worldviews, with philosophy and with ethics, with natural science and with the social sciences. And we should add explicitly that this theology must also be in constant conversation with other religions. In this sense, it must become a theology of religions that tries to make sense of the coexistence of different religious traditions. This does not imply, however, that theology should give up its roots in a particular tradition.

If in fact theology is to be better equipped for this task than other disciplines – such as, for example, the philosophy or the sociology of religion; or a religious studies approach – it must focus on the roots of tolerance or of peace and justice within the religious traditions themselves. Such a theology can have a degree of credibility and authority among believers that religious studies approaches can never have.

Saying this, it should again be clear that I do not want to limit theology to the perspective of the insider. Theological statements should not be confused with a confession of faith. Confessional principles may be axiomatic for theology, but the work of theology itself must be strictly academic. Academic theology, however, has always – or, to make the claim more modest, most often – been premised on interdisciplinary and conversational structures. The inclusion of the perspective of the other may not have been equally visible in theology at all times, but it certainly should be made visible today and it should be recognized as the prerequisite for a theology that can serve as the basis for education for tolerance, peace, and justice.

Conclusion

It is my conviction that the pluralist situations of multiculturalism and multireligiosity do not imply that we need less theology in religious education. The rejection of theology as a partner that can inform religious education is based on the identification of theology with confessionalism and with dogmatism, or even with Christian imperialism. The kind of theology I have tried to describe in the present chapter is neither confessionalist nor dogmatic in the traditional sense. This theology will not only be of help in understanding religion, it is also indispensable for any kind of true 'learning from religion' as well as for interreligious dialogue that goes beyond relativism and fundamentalism.

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