
Children and Youth Growing up in the Presence of Many Faiths: Implications for Christian Education

Friedrich Schweitzer

It is no coincidence that religious education has been one of the first disciplines of theology and ecclesial work to take up the challenges arising from the copresence of different faiths. Most likely, two parallel developments have played a role in shaping the awareness of the need to address these challenges. In many countries, the first encounter between children and adolescents of different religious backgrounds takes place in an educational context. When children enter preschool, or later, primary school, they are often grouped together with children from a given area or neighborhood, quite independently of their religious backgrounds. Consequently, educators—including Christian educators working in such institutions—are faced with the question of how to work with children and adolescents from very diverse backgrounds. They soon realize that education has much to contribute to establishing good neighborly relationships between different faiths. Moreover, they have observed how easily children seem to accept other children without wondering or worrying too much about differences, be they cultural or religious. It seems likely that by fostering children's openness vis-à-vis the other, relationships between different faiths in adolescence and adulthood can be improved significantly.

More needs to be said about children's and adolescents' views of the other than merely praising their openness. Through the work of developmental psychology and other contributions from recent research on childhood and adolescence¹ we have come to understand that children and adolescents have their own ways of making sense of things. They have their own worldviews as well as their own ways of constructing the world as it is called, for example, in constructivism. This also holds

¹ Cf. Friedrich Schweitzer, *Lebensgeschichte und Religion. Religiöse Entwicklung und Erziehung im Kindes- und Jugendalter*, revised edition (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007).

true for their faith and understanding of religion as well as their views on denominational or religious affiliations or memberships. The views and attitudes need special attention; specific approaches are required if they are to become good neighbors to people of other faiths.

There is more to this than only strategic considerations. Respecting their ways of viewing, constructing, or understanding other faiths has to do with our basic attitude towards them. In religious education, the plea for not treating children as objects but as subjects in their own right has resulted in a powerful reorientation of attitudes to education. Approaches based on children's rights, including their right to religion,² as well as their active and creative roles within the processes of nurture and education, have rightfully gained considerable influence in many societies and churches. Consequently, our starting point for thinking about children and youth in the context of interfaith relationships should not be the adults who deem it necessary that the younger generation learn about certain things for their later lives. Instead, we should start with the children and youth themselves.

In this article, I shall address the age span between early childhood and the late teenage years. As will become clearer in the following, many questions related to different faiths cannot be addressed without taking into account both, the stages of childhood and of adolescence.

Growing up with other faiths: family, school and congregation

Before experiencing the presence of other faiths in the educational institutions, children grow up within their families and often without immediate contact or exposure to the plurality of religions. Nonetheless, the increasing number of mixed marriages create a religiously plural environment. In many countries, marriages between members of different Christian denominations have become quite common. In Germany, for example, one third of all church weddings are Protestant–Protestant, one third Catholic–Catholic and one third Protestant–Catholic.³ Denominational

² Friedrich Schweitzer, *Das Recht des Kindes auf Religion. Ermutigungen für Eltern und Erzieher* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2000); Friedrich Schweitzer, "Children's Right to Religion and Spirituality: Legal, Educational and Practical Perspectives," in *British Journal of Religious Education*, vol. 27, no. 2 (March 2005), pp. 103–113.

³ Michael N. Ebertz, " 'Heilige Familie' – ein Auslaufmodell? Religiöse Kompetenz der Familien in soziologischer Sicht," in Albert Biesinger and Herbert Bendel (eds), *Gottesbeziehung in der Familie. Familienkatechetische Orientierungen von der Kindertaufe bis ins Jugendalter* (Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag 2000), pp. 16–43.

diversity has become part of family life. The number of Christian–Muslim marriages is still much smaller, with only a few thousand weddings per year in Germany.⁴ Moreover, at least in the West, families no longer function as a safe haven where children are familiarized with the religious convictions that they will adhere to for the rest of their lives.⁵ It is important to note that this is not due to secularization or a general loss of religiosity within the family. Contrary to earlier assumptions regarding the increasingly secular character of the family, today most social analysts maintain that families may not nurture their children religiously in the sense of church membership and the official creed of the church, but that they have not ceased to be committed to religious interests.⁶ A family's religious interest and orientation tend to focus on their needs and priorities, for instance around the main events in the family life cycle such as births, weddings and funerals. In terms of content, “family religion,” as some observers have called it,⁷ is often highly individualized in the sense of each family member's individual project rather than a faith conviction shared with a congregation or a whole church. While this holds true for many Christian families, it does not necessarily apply to those from other religious backgrounds. Muslim families, for example, often tend to be much more committed to the formal teachings of Islam as well as to its implications for nurturing children.

It is important to bear this in mind when we think about the encounter of children from different religious backgrounds; such prior experiences shape their encounter in important ways. For example, this encounter may take on the following form: children from a broadly Christian background, who have only experienced some form of individualized Christianity in their families, come together with children from a Muslim background characterized by the parents' more or less strict adherence to Islam or at least by the parents' continuous attempts to transmit Muslim convictions to their children. We can also imagine a

⁴ Regine Froese, *Zwei Religionen—eine Familie. Das Gottesverständnis und die religiöse Praxis von Kindern in christlich-muslimischen Familien* (Freiburg/Gütersloh: Herder/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005), p. 14.

⁵ Cf. Friedrich Schweitzer, *The Postmodern Life Cycle: Challenges for Church and Theology* (St Louis, MI: Chalice, 2004).

⁶ Albert Biesinger, Hans-Jürgen Kerner, Gunther Klosinski and Friedrich Schweitzer (eds), *Brauchen Kinder Religion? Neue Erkenntnisse—Praktische Perspektiven* (Weinheim, Basel: Beltz, 2005).

⁷ Ulrich Schwab, *Familienreligiosität. Religiöse Traditionen im Prozess der Generationen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1995).

very different situation, such as a Christian minority in a predominantly Muslim or Hindu environment.

Whatever the situation, we must always take into account the concrete situation in which children encounter other faiths. Becoming good neighbors to people of other faiths manifests itself in very different ways and consequently entails different tasks for Christian education. Christian education should address the encounter of different faiths within the context of educational institutions, regardless of whether these institutions include some kind of religious education or not.

Since, by their very nature, Christian congregations tend to be religiously homogenous, they do not allow for encounters with other faiths—unless they make a conscious effort to reach out to non-Christian communities. In the past, in Germany, only very few congregations have taken this seriously. As theological rationales for reaching out beyond one's own religion are accepted, attempts to do so are becoming more widespread. From the perspective of Christian education, congregations should make a conscious effort to include children and adolescents in such activities, not only by having them accompany the adults but also by developing special programs for them. Such programs will be more effective if they are informed by what we know about how children and adolescents regard other faiths.

What do we know about the responses of children and adolescents?

The need to help children and adolescents to become good neighbors to people of other faiths is not generally accepted. In a number of countries, most notably the United Kingdom and Germany, heated debates are taking place about the negative effects the exposure to different religions might have on children and adolescents. Most often, such debates refer to efforts within religious education in schools to include different religions in the curriculum. While fears of syncretism and relativism have often played a dominant role in the minds of the general public, some religious educators have pointed to the important potential that the educational exposure to different faiths might hold for dialogue and the peaceful coexistence of religions. Most of these discussions have taken place at the political level. Empirical research on the children's and adolescents' responses is rare, but its results are quite interesting and deserve our attention.

In the 1960s, against the background of Piaget's developmental psychology, the American psychologist, David Elkind (1961–1963), traced the different steps or stages in the understanding of different religious affiliations—Protestant, Catholic and Jewish—from childhood into adolescence. His findings show that perceiving and understanding different religions are closely related to the general (cognitive) development during childhood and adolescence. For example, in their references to different religions, younger children tended to focus on very concrete characteristics that can be observed in outward behavior, while references to inner convictions come only much later. Another challenge was in differentiating properly between different categories of membership in order to realize that, for example, a person can be Irish without being Catholic, or Catholic without being Irish.

Elkind's pioneering work has not been continued by other Piagetians. The well-known American psychologist and educator, James W. Fowler,⁸ for example, points to the applicability of Piaget's stages of faith development to the encounter between people of different faiths. However, at least to my knowledge, he has not studied this special aspect empirically. The same holds true for Fritz Oser, whose theory of religious development can be considered the major European version of recent Piagetian-type work in the area of religion.⁹ In our own research,¹⁰ which is mostly focused on Protestant and Catholic children, we encountered statements from children between the ages of seven and nine that fit very well with Elkind's earlier observations. In the first place, we were quite impressed by the ways in which children tried to make sense of the terms "Protestant" and "Catholic." Some of them maintained surprising theories concerning the question of how one becomes Protestant or Catholic. They suggested that the pastor would announce this after baptism or that it depended on what is written on the baptismal font. Others assumed that you could only tell when a child is two or three years old. Still others assumed that it depended on the year in which a child is born (in an even year the child will be Catholic...). Our first conclusion was that the children's and adolescents' views deserve respect because they are part of their general development and attempts to make

⁸ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), pp. 172–197.

⁹ Fritz Oser and Paul Gmünder, *Der Mensch—Stufen seiner religiösen Entwicklung. Ein strukturalgenetischer Ansatz* (Zürich: Benziger, 1984).

¹⁰ Biesinger, Kerner, Klosinski and Schweitzer, *op. cit.* (note 6).

sense of the world. Children encounter such terms as “Protestant” and “Catholic,” “Muslim” or “Hindu,” in the same way as other concepts or things that are new to them. Secondly, children and adolescents need educational support in their development in this respect. Their independent answers deserve respect but will not always lead to an accurate understanding.

Others such as Robert Jackson and Eleanor Nesbitt,¹¹ who worked with Hindu children in Britain, have pointed to the contextual nature of children’s and adolescents’ understandings of different religions, including their own. They found that the different contexts in which children grow up should be taken into greater consideration than psychological approaches have tended to do. According to these authors, the point of reference for understanding children’s and adolescents’ views on different religions should not be the body of doctrines maintained by these religions, but the way in which religion is actually lived by the people in question—children, adolescents and their families. In the case of Hindu children growing up in Britain, Jackson and Nesbitt have successfully shown how these forms differ markedly from their counterparts in other parts of the world. They are greatly influenced by the experiences of migration and living in the UK, but also by their families’ patterns of life. As a possible consequence, Jackson¹² suggests that the concept of religions be dropped altogether. He believes this term to presuppose separate religious bodies or entities that do not exist in real life, at least not in children’s and adolescents’ everyday lives. According to him, only ethnographic approaches can do justice to religion in real life.

Some critics of multifaith religious education in the UK, or of inter-religious learning in Germany, suggest that the simultaneous encounter with different religions could be confusing especially for younger children.¹³ Our own research indicates that this is not necessarily the case if the commonalities as well as the differences between religions are clearly spelt out. Children need both: opportunities to develop a clear religious identity that can give them a sense of belonging, as well as opportunities to encounter other faiths in order to develop dialogical skills and tolerant attitudes.

¹¹ Robert Jackson and Eleanor M. Nesbitt, *Hindu Children in Britain* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 1993).

¹² Robert Jackson, *Religious Education: An Interpretative Approach* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997).

¹³ For an overview of the discussion, see Karl Ernst Nipkow, *Bildung in einer pluralen Welt* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998).

Our knowledge of the ways in which children actually perceive and understand different religions remains very limited. Yet, it is easy to see that children have their own ways of making sense of the different faiths they encounter. Their interests and questions differ from those of adults and even more so from those in theology.

This also holds true for adolescents, although not in the exact same sense. Their views and understandings are quite different from theological expectations. Over the last decades, our own research as well as many other studies on youth and religion in the Western world have shown that religious individualization is what is most characteristic of the young adults' religious outlook and attitude. This concept should not be confused with the psychological ideal of individuation that refers to individual maturity in the sense of autonomy and independence. Individualized religion means that it is left to the individual what they want to believe and that religious affiliations and authorities do not play a normative or authoritative role. The adolescents interviewed often said that they "somehow" believe in "something" but that their faith is different from that of the church. They want to believe, yet find it impossible to believe in what the church teaches.

In a study related to religion and globalization,¹⁴ we also made interesting observations concerning religious relativism. Religious individualization is not the same as relativism but they can go together. Many of the adolescents we interviewed believe everyone has the right to believe—or not to believe—whatever they like. Our interviewees tended to take for granted that no one should be allowed to interfere with this right. Accordingly, every faith is of equal value, depending only on individual preference. While this understanding sounds rather individualistic and relativistic, the adolescents we interviewed surprisingly did not adopt this kind of religious relativism for themselves. While advocating for attributing equal value to all religions they stated that they would not be prepared to consider changing their own religious affiliation. As one of them put it, "They have their faith and we have ours ... everyone should decide for themselves But I do not say that it could also be right because then I would throw away my religion or my faith. I do believe in my God. In any case, I accept it [the other faith], it is okay but not for me."

Adolescents' views regarding different faiths have to be understood against this background of religious individualization. This has a number

¹⁴ Friedrich Schweitzer and Jörg Conrad, "Globalisierung, Jugend und religiöse Sozialisation," in *Pastoraltheologie* 91 (2002), pp. 293–307.

of important consequences. Above all, we must reconsider the concept of other faiths. From a theological perspective, it is quite obvious what other faiths mean. The point of reference is the Christian faith as it is defined by its biblical foundation, its creedal expressions and doctrinal interpretations. For the adolescents, however, the point of reference is less obvious. Most likely, they will start out with what they consider their own faiths and, according to their understanding, this faith is not identical with that maintained by the church and theology. Sometimes the adolescents in our studies seemed to perceive different denominations and religions as agencies operating in a market type situation. The individual may or may not use their services. In any case, the adolescents did not feel that they were part of the church in a way that would be consonant with the assumptions of Christian ecclesiology.

At the same time, the adolescents clearly felt the need to make sense of the religious plurality they encounter. For example, when we asked them about Protestants and Catholics they spontaneously answered by referring to other religions as well. The copresence of different religions confronts them with challenges that are of importance to them.

Adolescents encounter religious plurality in special ways. In many cases, the presupposition for their encounters is not a clear religious or Christian identity but some type of individualized religion. Any educational approach to working with adolescents must take this presupposition seriously.

From this perspective, there is a clear need for additional studies on children's perspectives on other faiths as well as on adolescents' ways of making sense of the religious plurality they encounter. Christian education has been very slow to take up this task and to conduct the empirical research this requires. In today's world, becoming better neighbors to people of other faiths must include children and adolescents, their education in schools and congregations and be based on familiarity with their views and attitudes. We will hardly be able to reach this goal without putting more emphasis on empirical research.

Perspectives for Christian education

In this final section, I shall point to a number of practical perspectives for Christian education. In doing so, I shall draw on the previous sections. It should also be clear that Christian education is not the immediate

result of empirical observations but has to take into account additional theological and educational considerations.¹⁵

The most important insight is the need to be aware of the differences between children's and adolescents' specific views on other faiths, on the one hand, and the general expectations of theology and the church on the other. Obviously, it is not enough to take other faiths seriously in theology and in the church. We need to ask how children and adolescents perceive and understand other faiths and how they make sense of them. This clearly goes beyond the traditional understanding of the task of didactics. Doing justice to children's and adolescents' perspectives is not the same as simplifying them so that children and adolescents can understand them. Instead, it implies being prepared to encounter them as partners in dialogue—partners who bring their own perspectives, no less so than partners in the dialogue with other faiths.

We need to design a *quasi* curriculum of other faiths corresponding to different age groups, developmental stages and social locations. Drawing on developmental psychology, some educators have designed such a curriculum for religious education in schools.¹⁶ According to this model, every age level should address certain aspects and questions related to other faiths. The overall aim is to design a sequence of consecutive steps that build on each other and, in the end, lead to an integrated cognitive and affective familiarity with other faiths. Each step should be designed in such a way that it will meet the needs and interests of the respective age group or level of development. Similarly, others have tried to describe such possibilities for congregations,¹⁷ starting from meeting people from different religious affiliations in childhood and leading to more reflexive forms of familiarity in adolescence and adulthood.

Certainly in most Western countries, and possibly in many others too, adolescents approach other faiths from a position deeply characterized by religious individualization. From the beginning, we must be aware of this presupposition in our approach. It does not make sense to presuppose a clear Christian identity with adolescents who feel quite different about their own faith. This is also why in Christian education

¹⁵ For the best overview of the German discussion on interreligious learning, see Biesinger, Kerner, Klosinski and Schweitzer, *op. cit.* (note 6).

¹⁶ Johannes Lähnemann, *Evangelische Religionspädagogik in interreligiöser Perspektive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).

¹⁷ Fowler, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp. 172–197.

in the context of different faiths it is crucial to go beyond familiarizing young people with the respective teachings of church and theology. We have to design ways of integrating such teachings into the lives of young people in a way that makes sense to them. This implies that we need to identify the questions and contexts in which the issue of other faiths becomes of interest to the adolescents themselves.

As I have tried to show in my earlier work,¹⁸ religious individualization is often considered a presupposition for religious tolerance. Many adolescents told us that everyone has the right to their own faith and that no one should be allowed to interfere with this right. Yet, upon closer examination, this kind of tolerance turns out to be no more than skin deep, and not based on any deeper familiarity with different faiths. Consequently, the adolescents' attitudes can hardly be considered an effective antidote, for example, against prejudice. This is why it remains important to put special emphasis on education for tolerance even in situations of religious individualization. Moreover, we should help children and adolescents to realize that, from a Christian perspective, tolerance is not an attitude that they should maintain in spite of the Christian faith with its claim to universal truth, but exactly because of this faith itself. It is easy to see that given this need for education for tolerance based on faith, models for religious education focussing only on ethics, such as the global ethics project designed by Hans Küng,¹⁹ do not suffice. The more or less exclusive focus on such ethical norms as the Golden Rule, characteristic of such models, falls short of the questions relating to faith.

Finally, the need to focus on the theological aspects of the encounter with other faiths should be taken as a challenge for exactly those fields in Christian education (i.e. Sunday school or confirmation classes), which in many cases have so far not been involved with different faiths. These fields tend to focus mainly on doctrinal questions, often much more so than religious education in schools. Becoming good neighbors to people of other faiths should be considered an important task for Christian congregations in the twenty-first century. Children and adolescents should not be left alone with the challenges of growing up in the presence of different faiths.

¹⁸ Friedrich Schweitzer, "Religious individualization: new challenges to education for tolerance," in *British Journal of Religious Education*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2007), pp. 89–100.

¹⁹ Hans Küng, *Projekt Weltethos* (Munich: Piper, 1990).