

Friedrich Schweitzer

The Meaning of Religious Development and Socialization for Learning and Teaching

Several years ago I attempted to make a case for the need for three complementary approaches to the language problem in religious education.¹ I characterized these approaches with the key words of *progress*, *continuity* and *change* which referred to the progressive development of understanding, to the continuity of basic human experiences, and to the changing of social and societal contexts. In terms of social scientific research, these approaches were shown to be related to theories of cognitive development, to psychoanalysis and to sociological theories of socialization.

In the meantime, I have been able to further elaborate the idea of the complementary approaches to religious education and to work towards a multidimensional or integrative model for curriculum development and teaching.² As none of the available theories of religious development and socialization, be it of psychological or sociological origin, is sufficient in order to effectively support and guide the work of teachers, a multidimensional model seems appropriate. The specific task of such a model is to bring together and, if possible, to integrate those cognitive-developmental, psychoanalytical and sociological theories which can be considered to be of primary importance to the field of religious education. My attempt to arrive at such a model is based on the idea of *hermeneutics* which I would like to use as a means of looking anew at the process of learning and teaching.

The classical image of hermeneutics is the circle. This image describes the unavoidable circular movement of understanding. Whoever enters this circle always proceeds from a certain *preunderstanding*, considers the object of understanding from the point of view of this preunderstanding, corrects his or her understanding and so arrives at a new preunderstanding. As far as learning means to encounter something new, it can also be considered as a process of understanding. In this sense, learning is premised on the general laws of hermeneutics, and teaching means to facilitate and to support the hermeneutical process.

If we look at learning in such a way, it becomes clear that teaching requires an awareness of the students' preunderstanding of a certain subject matter. Given the hermeneutical circle we may assume that students can only learn if they actually apply their preunderstanding to new objects and, in doing so, correct and refine their previous understanding.

Are teachers aware of this circular character of teaching? Do they allow for the difference between their own point of view and the students' preunderstanding? Let us consider an example from a lesson on parables which was conducted with 11 year old students:

Teacher: "... what about the last sheep?" **Student:** "... Jesus had a hundred sheep and he lost one. He then brought back the 99 sheep and followed the one sheep. And when he found it he said: 'Rejoice with me. I found the sheep. Those ... in heaven rejoice even more ...'" **Teacher:** "Yes - they rejoice when they see that a person whom they had actually lost has come back."

It is quite obvious that teacher and student presuppose a very different understanding of this parable. For the teacher this is a parable in the sense of a general theological statement referring to a lost person. For the student, however, it is a report of a singular event or of an action of Jesus. Therefore, the student does not identify Jesus as the Good Shepherd in a figurative or metaphorical sense but rather interprets the parable according to a literal understanding as referring to a lost animal.

I do not think that we should conclude from this example that the parable of the Good Shepherd can only be used with students who have actually attained the figurative understanding of metaphors. The question of which parables are to be used with what age groups or at what developmental levels certainly needs a more careful analysis than this one example can allow for. My point, however, is that students of whatever age are not supported effectively in their learning when the teacher is unaware of their way of hearing a story or, in this instance, a parable. If the students' preunderstanding is not attended to, the hermeneutical circle is cut short and learning does not take place.

In our example, the teacher could have been informed by the research of R. Goldman or J.W. Fowler that children often tend to understand parables and metaphors in a literal sense and that symbolic understanding as the realization of metaphorical meaning is a relatively late achievement which is not to be expected before (early) adolescence. Research of the Piagetian type then can indeed be used to refine and to strengthen the teachers' awareness of children's preunderstandings. In this case, cognitive-developmental research is not used as many critics fear, in order to define people in terms of stages or to match a given developmental state against a highest stage of development. Rather the stages are used as a critical tool against sterile types of instruction and in order to correct the myopia of adults over against children's own ways of looking at things.

The cognitive question if the metaphorical quality of a parable is realized is, however, not enough. Another question which is of equal importance refers to the experiences with which the imagery of the parable may resonate. The need for rescue and protection, for shelter or for guidance is certainly addressed by these images and so is the feeling of being lost, lonesome or astray, together with the hope of being found and, ultimately, not given up.

Such experiences are not independent of how one looks at the world and are, therefore, also connected to cognitive development. But it seems obvious that the core of such experiences is not cognitive but rather is existential, personal or social. A developmental scheme like that of E.H. Erikson which traces the subsequent

pattern of critical experiences across the life cycle will be more appropriate here. It helps us to know what experiences actually are in the foreground at a given age, which ones have already been encountered at previous stages and which ones can only be thought of in an anticipation of future segments of the life cycle.

In terms of learning, this implies that students' preunderstanding is also colored by the predominant experiences of a certain stage of crisis in the life cycle. For example, the one lost sheep in the parable might well be compared to the 99 well-behaved ones if the reader is an eleven year old who is concerned with questions of achievement and equality. (Note that in our example the student made it clear that the 99 sheep were first brought into safety!) Some might consider it unfair that the one sheep receives so much attention. Others might be glad that one might not be lost even if one's achievements are in question.

These last considerations about achievement and fairness bring to mind that the students' preunderstanding is not only influenced by psychological developments but is also shaped by social and societal factors. Individual development always is a social process and therefore can be considered as *socialization* - in the sense of becoming social through social influences. Therefore sociological research which brings out the influence which society and its institutions exert on the individual, needs to be included here as well.

In the case of the Good Shepherd and of the understanding of this parable, social influences can be discerned in several respects, of which I will only mention three. First, we need to be aware of the historical character of images. The image of the shepherd originally belonged to an agricultural society. In a modern situation, where students grow up without ever seeing a flock of sheep, the image might be hard to understand. Second, there are the various social backgrounds which students bring to the classroom - most of all from their families but also from contexts which are related to gender, race or class. Third, there are what I would propose to call *counter-models* and *ideological abuse*. By counter-models I mean models of social action and interaction according to which a given society works and which operate on principles that are different from the ones expressed in the parable. The principle of economical rationality, for example, might tell us that it is better to loose one sheep than to risk a whole flock and that the loss of one percent must always be foreseen in the overall calculation. Counter-models can also include the ideological abuse of images. Biblical images are often drawn upon in advertisement. The bank then is made to appear as the Good Shepherd of our money and shelter is associated with the thick walls of the bank's safe.

The three approaches of cognitive development, psychosocial development and societal influences as they are described in Piagetian theories, psychoanalytical models and in sociological accounts of society, can be considered as complementary approaches to religious development and socialization. I do not claim that these approaches are exhaustive. But they all highlight some important aspects which are contained in the preunderstanding of students.

Social and historical influences	Psychosocial crises of the life cycle (E.H. Erikson)	Corresponding religious symbols	Stages of Faith (J.W. Fowler)
→	Basic trust vs. mistrust	The numinous (God, mother-goddesses) the (lost) paradise and the hope for the kingdom of God	
→	Autonomy vs. shame, doubt	Good and evil, grace, obedience and exodus symbols of eating and drinking	} Intuitive-Projective
→	Initiative vs. guilt	Loving and punishing father father-godhead sin and redemption repentance	} Mythic-Literal
→	Industry vs. inferiority	Vocation, the human task in creation, works	} Synthetic-Conventional
→	Identity vs. identity confusion	Faith, shared convictions God's solidarity (with suffering) alienation and redemption	} Individuative-Reflective
→	Intimacy vs. isolation	Community christological topics	} Conjunctive
→	Generativity vs. stagnation Integrity vs. despair	Creation vocation, care for the future the holy, eschatology	

How can these approaches be combined? The chart which is printed below is based on the following assumptions: In the center from top down, we have the eight ages or crises of the life cycle according to E.H. Erikson. Next to it on the right, we have listed the religious symbols which in one way or another seem to correspond, or to be correlated (in the sense of Paul Tillich), to the experiences of a given age³. On the far right, J.W. Fowler's stages of faith are noted in such a way, that the average correlation between a stage of the life cycle and a faith stage becomes visible. Except for the first of Fowler's stages, the brackets are open at their one end. This is to indicate the crucial fact that one faith stage can overlap with several stages of the life cycle. (For instance, Erikson's stage 5, "identity vs. identity confusion", can coincide with faith stages 2, 3, or 4!) This overlap also implies that after a certain age, groups will be increasingly heterogeneous in terms of their respective mix of faith stages. The column on the far left has not been filled out in detail. The arrows are to indicate that social conditions influence the developmental stages in various ways and that such influences must be identified for each particular situation.

Notes

1. Cf. my article 'Progress, Continuity and Change: Three Approaches to the Language Problem in Religious Education'. In: *British Journal of Religious Education* 9 (1987): 70-77.
2. Cf., also for further references which cannot be given here, F. Schweitzer: *Lebensgeschichte und Religion. Religiöse Entwicklung und Erziehung im Kindes- und Jugendalter*. München 1987, esp. ch. 6 and 9, and my article 'Lebensgeschichte und religiöse Entwicklung als Horizont der Unterrichtsplanung'. In: *Der Evangelische Erzieher* 40 (1988): 532-551.
3. Here I am referring to the work of several authors like J. Scharfenberg, D. Capps, J.E. Wright, H.-J. Fraas. For detailed references see my *Lebensgeschichte und Religion* (note 2), chapter 6.

Friedrich Schweitzer
works in the field of education,
religious education and theology.
He teaches at the University of Tübingen.

Dr. Friedrich Schweitzer
Neckarhalde 19
7400 Tübingen
West Germany