

Media culture and interreligious learning – a religious education perspective

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In the teaching about world religions and interreligious learning the media have received little attention up till now, and then mainly in the form of practical advice on teaching with multimedia. This can be exemplified by the comprehensive “International Handbook of Inter-religious Education” (Engebretson et al. 2010). It contains one contribution on “Promoting Interfaith Education through ICT” (Gross 2010) that deals with the instrumental use of electronic media for teaching, but the eminent role of media culture in shaping and influencing the image of religion and religions in Western societies does not come into the focus of the handbook.

This is a somewhat surprising finding given that much of the international research contained in this volume shows clearly that today’s media culture is of great significance for religions and for interreligious understanding. I am concerned here with the public, mainly electronic media, and if I use the shorthand of “media culture” I am referring primarily to the electronic mass media and their content.

Before examining how they affect religious education and interreligious learning, I would like to clarify how interreligious learning can be conceptualised in the context of the philosophy of education.

1. What is interreligious learning? Reflections from educational theory

To my mind, one of the most convincing modern views of religious education in the context of the philosophy of education is given by Bernhard Dressler. Bernhard Dressler’s central idea is that religious education depends on being able to alternate between an internal religious perspective and an external perspective; the change of perspective being between “speaking religiously” and “speaking about religion” (Dressler 2006, p. 94; cf. also Dressler 2012), between taking part in cultural and communicative practice (participation) and observing, considering, evaluating this practice (reflection). Children and young people have to learn both: they should at least have an idea of what a lived religion is; they

should be enabled to take part in it, if that is what they want, and they should be able to think and evaluate critically the role of religion in their lives, in other people's lives and in our society.

Dressler places this view of religious education within the general pedagogical concept of different ways of accessing the world, or what Jürgen Baumert (2002) calls "modes of encountering the world". In this context encountering the world through religion is (together with philosophy, which also addresses "problems of constitutive rationality") different from, and not to be equated with, other modes such as the natural sciences or art and aesthetics. For Dressler each mode of accessing the world involves the dialectics of participation and reflection or, to use Niklas Luhmann's expression, of first-order and second-order observation. For example, physics takes a characteristic scientific view of the world (the world is observed from the viewpoint of physics); at the same time physics education includes the knowledge that this perspective is one among others. The characteristic second-order observation is how physics apprehends the world and makes a model or construct of it. Dressler considers it important for education generally, and for religious education in particular, that students should learn to distinguish between the different ways of accessing the world, but also to alternate between, and form connections among, them.

In this context it is important to note that religion, in itself, educates. In other words, accessing the world through religion has a strong correlation with education because religious spirituality helps one to see oneself, and the world, from an external perspective. Asking about God and about the whole purpose and meaning of my life helps to distance me from my immediate situation, allowing me to take a bird's eye view – or God's eye view – of myself and my life. This distancing from the self, or from the world, literally opens up new perspectives of perception and judgement. From a Christian theological point of view Henning Luther sums up religion as "distance from the world" (Luther 1992, p. 25); Dietrich Korsch describes religious competence as a "competence for difference" in one's life, "the ability to interpret oneself, that is, a distancing from the self which enables a return to the self" (Korsch 2004, p. 17).

I shall now expand a little beyond Dressler and show how the interreligious dimension of religious education fits into this concept. Following his basic approach we find that at the heart of meaningful learning about so-called "foreign" religions is this alternation of internal and external perspective. Dressler himself shows that today for many students in Christian RE Christianity is a foreign religion, and that it must be assumed that many of them are neither religious nor believers. Yet, these non-believer students should also be encouraged to explore a Christian faith perspective and, in so doing, try out an internal perspective of

religion. The same goes for learning about other religions in Christian RE and for students who confess to be believers and to belong to a particular religion.

I well remember 10th grade high-school students coming to me at the end of an RE lesson on Buddhism saying, "Herr Pirner, are you actually trying to convert us to Buddhism?" I took the question as a compliment, because my lesson had obviously succeeded in giving a comprehensible and attractive picture of Buddhism from an internal perspective, which had really confused my Christian students in their Protestant RE class. At least it had given them an inkling of what Buddhism is all about. An internal perspective is indispensable for religious education and best delivered, of course, by a representative of the particular religion. However, it is part of the professionalism of religious education teachers – including denominational RE classes – to put themselves in the position of other religions with empathy and understanding and convey the internal perspective as comprehensibly as possible.

At the same time, the context of religious pluralism generates the awareness that a specific religious perspective is one among others. It is by encountering other religions or world views that an external perspective on one's own religion or world view can develop. A Christian encountering Islam, for example, realises that his Christian perspective is not the only possible or meaningful interpretation of life, the world and reality. And it is also true that, through encounter with religion(s), those with non-religious or atheist leanings can realise that their "god-less" view of the world is not the only possible one. Experiences like these urge and promote reflection: How do Islamic and Christian perspectives relate to each other? How do religious and atheist perspectives relate to one another? In a case of conflict, how can one judge which perspective is the more appropriate, the more true? Consequently, in an educational theory perspective encounter with other religions and world views is to be encouraged precisely because it stimulates, supports and promotes reflective education.

This, however, also requires intensive study of one's own internal religious or world-view perspective, because it is primarily from this internal perspective that I view and evaluate the perception that my religion or world view is not the only one. This evaluation implies two aspects: The first is that the other religion is *de facto* in competition to my own in the field of general interpretative frameworks searching for the truth of life and reality. The second is that, unlike other modes of encountering the world my religion and other religions reveal 'family resemblances' (Wittgenstein). It is therefore possible that people with a strong faith or world view will have a better understanding and appreciation of a different religion or world view from their own than people unconcerned with either. As a result, different religions may find themselves allies in defending the right to access the world through religion against those challenging that basic assumption.

But when the emphasis is on competition alone, and the internal perspective rejects the idea of religious pluralism, then this raises fundamental barriers and is an obstacle to education. Karl Ernst Nipkow was right to emphasise so strongly that, if interreligious understanding and interreligious learning are to stand a chance, religious persons must be able to value and appreciate religious pluralism from their own internal religious perspective (cf. Nipkow 1998).

I would like to follow another train of thought here. In the context of social and religious pluralism, the external perspective is not just an abstraction which lets me perceive my own religion or world view as one among others. Rather, the external perspective is a multiple one; that is, it sheds the light of a number of external perspectives on my own religion. It lets me see, for example, how psychology or sociology views religion generally, and my religion in particular. And I learn how a different religion views my religion; how, for example, Christianity is viewed from the perspective of Judaism, Islam or the Bahá'í faith. This engages further reflective, educational processes which require me to renew my understanding of my own religion by exploring the external perspectives I encounter. A religion that willingly and competently faces this challenge to take into account perspectives from other religions and world views can be enriched and gain a deeper self-understanding. Such a religion could be called a reflective or educated religion.

As a conclusion we can say that frequent change between internal and external perspective(s) is a vital component of religious and interreligious education. The ability to accomplish such change of perspective is the essence of religious and interreligious competence. And: an 'educated religion' denotes one that is ready and able to relate external perspectives critically and constructively to its internal perspectives, possibly to the point of integration.

In this context of religious education, how is the role of electronic media to be understood?

2. Media and interreligious learning from the perspective of educational theory

2.1. Media and education

First of all, accessing the world through media has, as we have noted in the case of religion, a strong correlation with education, because a vital component of media reality is the dialectic between internal and external perspectives, between representation and distance, between participation and reflection. Media bring

what is far away or unfamiliar close to us, enabling participation and empathy, and put what is familiar and near at an unfamiliar distance so that we see it "with different eyes". Media reception research examines the alternation between media and non-media reality which is a characteristic of the way audiences interact with media realities (cf., for example, Mikos 1994, p. 81). When I watch a film I can enter its internal perspective and "be there", but I can also exit at will and think my own thoughts about the presentation of the theme, the performance of the actors or the camera work.

In particular, public media reinforce external perspectives of religion and religions by promoting pluralisation and globalisation and thus broadening our horizon. By introducing varied, strange, unfamiliar ways of life from far-off countries they contribute significantly to multicultural and multi-religious experience. Even if someone in Europe has never actually met a Jewish person, they will have seen pictures on television of "Jewish settlers in the West Bank", or of ultra-orthodox Jews at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The world-wide reaction to the Danish Muhammad cartoons would have scarcely been conceivable without television or the internet, nor the controversy caused by German Chancellor Merkel at the ceremony honouring the Danish cartoonist. These instances show the media pressing for interreligious issues and promoting interreligious discourse. The media demand and promote education – in particular religious education and a critical media education that addresses questions about the truth and reality of media images.

2.2 Media and religion I: why media culture resembles religion

Not only has media culture a strong correlation with education, it has also a strong correlation with religion. Public media, like religion, are observers of virtually the whole world and the whole of our lives. The big questions about our lives – where we have come from, where we are going, about destiny, love and death – are the major stuff of media narratives and, at the same time, the central questions of religion. To this extent for many people in the West the media are a kind of religion or religion substitute. Many young people looking for meaning and direction in their lives find them, not in traditional religions, but in the media – a development established in a number of empirical studies (cf. Pirner 2009a; 2009b; 2011b).

In this respect media culture is competing with religions in endeavouring to explain the realities of life and the world; it has, on the one hand, become something of an ersatz religion and is certainly partly responsible for the loss of status among the traditional, institutional religions. On the other hand, the religion-like

status of the media is also capable of acting as a bridge to religion: by sensitising people to existential, ethical and religious questions and dimensions of life and thereby making them receptive to religious interpretation and practice. Media reality can convey the sense that there is something “over and above” our everyday reality; it can act as a common reference point or language, a “lingua franca”, across the divide of religion or culture. For example, empirical evidence suggests that young Muslims in Germany find hip hop helps integration (cf. Lübcke 2007; for more details on the lingua-franca function of the media see Pirner 2009c).

2.3 Media and religion II: religion as content of the media culture

Media culture offers chances for the religions to portray themselves and their internal perspective; above all, though, they see themselves portrayed from many other external perspectives. News reports, commentaries and internet pages spotlight religions and world views from all possible angles and aspects. Popular fictional stories and advertising messages frequently use, and often transform, elements, symbols and narratives from religious tradition (cf. Pirner 2001; Buschmann/Pirner 2003). The same happens with the relationship of religions to each other or their dealings with one another. For religious education this presents opportunities as well as challenges. Religious education can start with the presence of religion in media culture and from there disclose the backgrounds, origins and roots of religious traditions and perspectives. When religion is transformed or distorted in the media this can and should be subjected to critical analysis – an analysis that should extend to the functions and mechanisms of the media, as well as the commercial and power interests in the background. Religious education and media education thus can and should go hand in hand.

To sum up, this viewpoint from educational theory sees a major task in the field of media and religion to help children and young people to distinguish between different realities or modes of accessing the world – those of the media and religion –, to discover or create multiple connections between them and develop the ability to assess these connections critically.

3. Media and interreligious learning – a perspective from socialisation theory

For all that I have certainly gained from Bernhard Dressler’s approach to educational theory, I have to question some of his premises from socialisation theory and what they reveal about his concept of religion. With regard to religion and

religious socialisation, Dressler tends to the view that children and young people are “*tabulae rasae*”, blank slates, with little idea of religion, the principal task for teachers of religion being to act as tourist guide introducing them to a foreign country (cf. Dressler 2009, p. 124).¹ Similar views about the socialisation of today’s younger generation can be found in numerous religious education programmes and publications. I would not deny that young people are less familiar than ever with biblical and Christian traditions, and that the very unfamiliarity of Christianity can present school students with a fresh stimulus and challenge to find out about the unknown. But if this view becomes over-dominant there is a risk that too narrow an understanding of religion will lead to an educational deficit model that views children and young people only or primarily as exhibiting a deficiency which must be remediated by the religious education teacher. By contrast, if we employ a wider concept of religion, we may discover that many young people, although not familiar with biblical or Christian traditions, have their own ways and languages to reflect on and communicate about God, faith and the existential questions of life. And even if they are without contact to a religious community they may have encountered many cultural elements of religion in popular media culture and use the language codes and symbols of pop music or of fantasy and science fiction films to exchange ideas on existential, ethical and religious themes. This is exactly what recent empirical studies on youth cultures and on the language young people use reveal, as will be demonstrated below. For educational as well as theological reasons pedagogical approaches that appreciate and value young people’s own resources and skills should be preferred to a deficit pedagogy or model. It seems important to apply the principle “There is no child who cannot do anything, who has nothing useful or interesting to tell [...]” (Lähnemann 2005, p. 413) also to the field of religious education – and to media education as well. As many teachers know from experience, children and young people often display skills in the field of electronic and digital media which surpass the skills of their teachers.

The idea of the pupils as “*tabulae rasae*” presents a problem, above all because it disregards forms of informal learning from contexts other than family and community. For the particular area of interreligious learning, Karl Ernst Nipkow has rightly emphasised the importance of informal learning and in this context has also referred to forms of youth culture and media (Nipkow 2005, pp. 367ff.).

¹ It is not the place here to analyse Dressler’s concept of religion in detail. Nevertheless, there seems to me to be a certain tension between a narrow, phenomenological, more substantive understanding of religion, where he is concerned didactically with “showing” religion, and a broader, more functional understanding of religion in the context of educational theory.

To sum up: children and young people live their lives today, to a substantial degree, in the world of media. Their socialisation is largely a media socialisation. This, and the way the media are used in young people's peer groups and in youth cultures without the involvement of educational institutions, and mostly without adult educational accompaniment, is often termed in the sociology of childhood and youth the "self-socialisation" of adolescents by and with media (cf. Abels/König 2010, pp. 229ff.; Rhein/Müller 2006; Pirner 2004; Zinnecker 2000). Religious and interreligious learning are part of this self-socialisation and therefore to be given consideration in the processes of intentional teaching and learning. Two empirically documented examples will demonstrate this religious self-socialisation.

The first example is from the popular television science fiction series "Star Trek". It shows a world in the distant future in which intelligent life in human-like form has already been discovered on many other planets. The peoples of these planets have learned by and large to get along peacefully with one another and to respect their differences. An important role is played by varied forms of religion and spirituality, and a recurring principle of the plot is respect for the other religion and a willingness to take from it something that may inform one's own religious or non-religious world view (cf. Hellmann/Klein 1997; Buchholz 1998). An empirical study of Star Trek fans conducted at the University of Bonn found that many of them, too, placed a high value on tolerance for other, unfamiliar ways of life and faith (Volkskundliches Seminar 2006).

The second example is of the goths, members of a subculture sometimes also referred to as the black scene, who stand out because of their preference for wearing black and for their emphasis on death and transience. In this youth culture, media, especially certain forms of pop and rock music, play an important role. In an empirical study we interviewed young adults on this scene (Sprio 2008; Pirner 2011a), and were able to confirm the result of an existing study (Schmidt/Neumann-Braun 2008) that a major characteristic of the scene is thinking deeply about things. Those involved reject a shallow culture of having fun, playing hard and looking beautiful. The conventional taboos in society, talking about death, transience and religion, are no taboos in the gothic youth culture; goths think deeply about religious matters, including showing tolerance towards those with different religious or non-religious leanings. Below are two examples from the interviews:

"Sure, there are Christians here too, and there aren't many who believe in nothing at all. O.k., not necessarily in God, but in ghosts or something. [...]" (Sprio 2008, p. 38; Sina, 20J.)

"What is also a general characteristic [of gothic culture] is that people are looking for something that's not just up there or down here, something you can't

touch or see, something science can't prove. Everybody's looking for something different. [...] It doesn't have to be Jesus Christ, but it could be, and there are people who say, that it is for me, but I'm still a goth [...]" (Schmidt/Neumann-Braun 2008, p. 245; Manfred, Passage 27).

I don't deny that these statements show signs of a syncretism that may be regarded as being problematic. But at least one can welcome, pedagogically and theologically, the underlying trend of thoughtful tolerance, or tolerant thoughtfulness which goes against superficiality and dismissing religion outright. It is striking how the goth scene has developed its own symbolic language allowing communication on existential and religious matters. This language certainly draws on tradition, including religious tradition, but it also has something self-contained about it. In a recent empirical study on young people's language use Stefan Altmeyer has shown that, even for youngsters not affiliated to a religious community, religion is not a "foreign language" and it is therefore wrong to describe them as "religiously speechless" (Altmeyer 2011).

I am convinced that religious education, especially when the aim is interreligious learning, should take seriously the experience and skills young people already possess, often acquired through informal processes of self-socialisation, and use them as a pedagogical starting point. In this view, a key task for religious education is to accompany educationally the religious (self-)socialisation of children and young people. School education is, above all, effective, if it impacts on the students' self-socialisation and enhances their non-formal learning experience in their everyday life world. If students have studied in religious education classes the way religions are portrayed by the media, and take this on board in their everyday media experience with a different, more discriminating, more critical eye, then this would be a positive impact. Such an approach to religious education will most probably succeed if elements of media education are built in to religious education syllabuses.

In conclusion I would like to express these ideas in terms of five guidelines for religious education practice, with reference to associated and desirable competences.

4. Media and interreligious learning – five guidelines for educational practice

1. Do not think of children and young people as "blank slates" with little idea of religion and, at best, able to ask questions or seek answers (deficit model). Think of them rather as "experts" of their daily (media) lives, who have already reflected by themselves on existential, religious and interreligious questions and

who have already found some answers (resources model). Help them to develop their personal resources constructively and self-critically (in the sense of accompanying their self-socialisation educationally) and in so doing to discover the life-enriching potential of religion(s) as part of, or apart from, the media culture – but also to become aware of the life-endangering risks of religion(s) (perceptual competence).

2. Do not think of children and young people as religiously “speechless”. Anticipate, rather, that even secular adolescents may make use of elements of a (symbolic) language from media culture with which to reflect on and discuss issues of existential, ethical and religious scope. Incorporate media elements in religious education classes to improve communication with students – especially those with less language skills. With the help of religious traditions, support them in acquiring more thoughtful, discriminating, reflective competences of religious expression, communication and thinking.

3. Do not think of children and young people as just passive consumers of media culture, helplessly exposed to its manipulative influences, but rather as active, constructive, if often vulnerable, media users. Think of religious education classes as an opportunity to reveal the distortions and bias in the way religions are portrayed by the media, and to foster a culture of media use in which media and content are perceived in a more nuanced, critical way, and used more creatively and autonomously (perceptual, interpretative and creative competences).

4. Do not construct a contradiction between the primary experiences of direct social encounter and the seemingly secondary experiences of the world of media. Show young people valuable alternatives to media consumption as well as valuable alternatives to the general superficiality of media. Support them in finding orientation in Christianity or other religions so as to engage critically and constructively with the media and to develop their skills of judgement about the media and non-media world (evaluative competence).

5. Do not refer to media culture in a generalised, disparaging way; remember that, in order to “function”, neither religions nor democratic societies (nor religious and interreligious dialogue in them) can dispense with the media. Grasp the opportunity of the contribution media cultures make to intercultural and interreligious understanding; help young people to media and religious competence and to take part in religious, interreligious and social communication (participatory and creative competences).

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