



Discovering the Child? Individualization Processes of Catholic Religious Education in the Horizon of Secularization since 1900

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Abstract: At the beginning of the 20th century, early processes of secularization – especially in working-class families living in large cities – and inadequate teaching methods led to a crisis of Catholic religious education. Teachers and professors highlighted that it was becoming more and more difficult for religious education to reach students and to ensure that they become devoted members of the Church. In this situation, a catechetical movement was established, which was mainly situated in Munich and Vienna, where teachers, catechists, and academics discussed reforms of the commonly used teaching methods in religious education. Conferences and the foundation of journals followed. It is at least from this point that the process of modernization in the field of religious education in the German-speaking context begins. This modernization gained traction after the Second Vatican Council and was also promoted by the phenomenon of secularization and pluralization after the 1960s. Against this background, the essay will address the following questions: What led to the modernization of religious education that began around 1900? What role was played by the new openness of catechists and theologians for education science and the (religious) pluralization of society? To answer this question, the article will focus on developments between 1900 and the 1920s, during the 1970s, and the more or less topical discussion about the concept of ‘theology of children’ since the late 1990s. This study will also ask whether this development can be described as the discovery of the child in theology and religious education. Finally, this paper asks what consequences this development has for a denominational religious education in state schools today and in the future.

Keywords: Munich method, secularization, individualization, religious education, theology of children, dogma, non-denominational students

Nowadays, religious education in German-speaking countries is characterized by a high degree of individualization. This does not only apply to the protestant context but also to the Catholic one, as remarked by Werner Simon (2001, 221). This individualization of denominational religious education can certainly be explained by secularization processes in society. However, it is argued here that individualization can also be understood as a consequence of a gradual pedagogical modernization of the school subject religious education. According to this view, catechetics and scientific religious education itself initiated and advanced this process. This contribution of religious education teachers and religious educationalists at universities to the individualization of religious learning processes in schools was not only a reaction to secularization, but also an effort to facilitate the religious education

and religiousness of adolescents and – at least in the further course – also a form of advocacy for the interests of the students vis-à-vis the doctrine of faith. This placed the students at the center of religious education processes and ultimately resolved the ambivalence of Christianity toward the subject in its favor. Although there is still a critical glance concerning religious individualization on the part of Church representatives or theologians, it can be stated that religious learning processes cannot deny the individuality of students, or also adult learners. Religious educationalists who emphasize this are no longer called ‘subjective theologians,’ as Johann Baptist von Hirscher (1788–1865), one of the forefathers of modern religious educational science at the beginning of the 19th century (Biesinger 1989). Because this was a ‘dirty word’ for him, he felt compelled to defend himself against it.¹ Those days are over, but religious educationalists and the school subject religious education is faced with new challenges in the context of individualization and secularization.

The subsequent analysis is intended to address the following questions: What led to the modernization of religious education that started around 1900? What role was played by the new openness of catechists and theologians toward pedagogy and didactics? To answer these questions, the article will focus on developments between 1900 and the 1920s, during the 1970s, and the more or less topical discussion about the concept of ‘theology of children’ (*Kindertheologie*) since the late 1990s. This leads to the question, of whether one can describe these processes of development in the field of religious education as a discovery of children. Finally, the problem that arises is – what does the actual advanced individualization of religious education and the secularization of society mean for the field of religious learning in the future? This article focuses on the development and discussion of religious education in German-speaking countries. Even though there are different forms of organization of religious education here, the situation is comparable and there is a close exchange of scientific knowledge. In other countries, the development looks different in some cases and ranges from a very strong secularization such as in France or the Netherlands to a rather slower secularization process such as in Poland (Joas 2004, 14–15; Schreiner 2015, 122; Mąkosa 2017, 21).

The relationship between Christian revelation and the human subject has always been ambivalent. Although, as Charles Taylor notes, one of the characteristics of Christianity is personality orientation, it was precisely those who cultivated

¹ Hirscher’s reviewer accused him of questioning the Church’s objective faith through an individualized theology or catechetics. He countered his opponents: “Ich habe ... die Lehre, welche mir die Kirche zu glauben vorstellt, so gut zu fassen gesucht, als es gehen wollte; ich habe sie in meine Sprache übersetzt ...; ich habe sie in dieser Weise dann Andern wiedergegeben, und viele haben sich dadurch unterrichtet und angeregt gesehen. Gewiß habe ich damit das objective, d.h. formulierte Wort der Kirche nicht schmälern wollen. Deßungeachtet haben Menschen mir mißtraut, ob ich auch der Kirchenlehre treu? Und haben mich einen subjectiven Theologen genannt.” (Simon 1997, 9–10)

a particularly individual relationship with God, i.e., above all the mystics or those who also wanted to make such a relationship possible for lay people – Taylor calls them religious virtuosos – who were quickly exposed to the suspicion of heresy (Taylor 2013, 30–31). Examples include the medieval mystic and scholar Meister Eckhart (around 1260–1328), who is a central reference for the concept of education, or Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the founder of the Jesuit congregation, who offered spiritual exercises for ordinary rural people after his conversion, which made him a suspect for the Inquisition (Kiechle 2001, 36). However, even apart from such rather elitist figures in the history of piety, subjectiveness has marked its presence in Christianity – sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker – especially in the field of religious education. This applies to the catechumenate in antiquity, the Middle Ages with its cathedral schools and the annual obligation to confess and take communion at Easter, as well as the Reformation and Enlightenment in the early modern period (Gemeinhardt 2022, 9; Maier 2022, 17; Gronover 2012, 101–5; Taylor 2013, 27–30; Simon 1997, 11). The relationship between revelation and subject had to be constantly rebalanced in religious education. Also, during the ultramontane and antiliberal period of the Catholic Church, aspects of individualized piety were possible (Bucher 1998, 48–50 and 210). The fact that dogma always remained the decisive point of reference for the subject was hardly questioned because faith and the Church had a stabilizing effort on society. In addition, Christianity was also part of the state order or even guaranteed it, as can be seen, for example, from the fact that the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1795–1861) blamed the ‘irreligious wisdom of the masses’ taught in schools for the 1848 revolution (Maier 2018, 315).

It was around 1900 that this role of the Church began to falter, when religious teachers and catechists, particularly in large cities and especially with regard to children from the working class, realized that religious education was increasingly less able to reach students and that it was also more difficult to educate children religiously. This situation led to a catechetical movement that was committed to the modernization of religious education and whose centers were Munich and Vienna. This was the start of a modernization process that not only changed religious education and raised questions about the setting of religious education as a whole, but also marked the successive transition from the academic discipline of catechetics to religious education science and was therefore crucial for the relationship between religious pedagogy and educational science.

1. The Catechetical Reform Movement and the Münchner Methode between around 1900 and 1920

Catholic religious education and catechism lessons around 1900 were characterized by the tripartite scholastic learning scheme of 'lectio,' 'memoria' and 'imitatio.' The first step was to read out and memorize questions from the catechism. These questions and topics were then explained by teachers using examples, usually with biblical references. Finally, the aim was to point out the useful application of the aspect of the catechism that had been discussed. In the background was the idea that the content of the faith was presented to the students and that they would also come to believe in it in the course of memorization. The believer was, therefore, the recipient of the revealed, finalized faith formulated in dogmas. Faith was thus regarded as 'holding doctrines to be true' (Ziebertz 1997, 197–98).

Already in the Enlightenment age, Catholic catechists had criticized and modified such an understanding of faith or model of mediation, but the anti-modernism that had set in since the 1850s in the Catholic Church ensured that these departures could no longer be pursued. As long as the parental home and parish continued to function as instances of religious socialization, children and young people grew into a religious practice here so that catechism lessons seemed plausible. However, around 1900, a fairly large number of catechists – especially in large cities – realized that the scholastic model of teaching was reaching its limits. The reason was that the contact with the parish and the religious context in the family, particularly among working-class families, was often no longer present. In addition, religious education teachers found that their colleagues in 'secular' school subjects such as German or history were not only better received by the students with their lessons, but also achieved significantly better learning outcomes. This was attributed to the use of newer pedagogical and didactic concepts that had not previously played a role in catechism lessons (Läpple 1981, 131 and 179).

Religious education teachers and catechists in Munich and Vienna were particularly active in reforming Catholic religious education. In the following part, this paper must restrict itself to the developments in the Munich circle and the Münchner Methode that was developed there.

The reform efforts aimed at religious education as a school subject that would be able to educate children and young people to develop morally and religiously. This called for new didactic approaches and made it necessary to take a look at pedagogy and psychology. The people of the Munich circle – above all Heinrich Stieglitz (1868–1920), Anton Weber (1868–1947), and Josef Göttler (1874–1935) – orientated themselves toward the concepts of the educationalists Otto Willmann (1839–1920) and Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster (1869–1966). The protagonists of the Munich method, members of the Munich and German Catechists' Association, formed on November 26, 1900, a special group, the so-called 'Pädagogisches Kränzchen' ('Pedagogical

Circle'), and worked out a psychologically based teaching method for religious education: the Münchner Methode, also known as the psychological or inductive method (Kropač 2006, 40–46; Ziebertz 1997, 198; Läßle 1981, 181–82).

In this respect, the Munich method represents an attempt to structurally incorporate a focus on students into religious education lessons. From a didactic point of view, the protagonists of the new method postulated a focus on previous knowledge or connecting factors in the students' environment and experience, as Foerster, for example, had demanded. In his opus *Jugendlehre* (Theory of the Youth) he stated: "The first wisdom of all pedagogy is that the teacher should seek a link to the child's circle of interests for his or her subject matter"² (Foerster 1917, 11). In addition, they focussed on findings from the psychology of learning, i.e., on the one hand on the child's reception structure, which does not begin with the concept but with the experience or perception and only leads from there to the concept. On the other hand, the development of children played a role, as Otto Willmann had already pointed out: "The growth of human powers is, up to certain limits, a continuous process and, on the whole, is more similar to walking along a gradually ascending path than to climbing steps; only nature and, following it, society has divided this path into certain stages, the achievement of which can be compared to climbing steps" (Willmann 1909, 436). According to this, Göttler, for example, demanded that lesson planning must follow the 'nature' of the students: "The teaching stages must be nothing other than a stimulation and guidance of the necessary learning stages based on the psychology of the natural learning process" (as quoted in Ziebertz 1997, 199).

The Munich method divided teaching into five stages (Kropač 2020; Läßle 1981, 182): (1) *preparation* (attunement or accommodation, designed to arouse the students' interest), (2) *presentation* (using a story, a picture, etc.), (3) *explanation* (the essentials should be extracted and explained), (4) *summary* (reference to the catechism) and (5) *practical application* (e.g., for religious life, the liturgy, the church year or a specific task).

The following passage will illustrate the teaching steps using the example of a draft lesson by Anton Weber on St. Monica, the mother of the Doctor of the Church St. Augustine, and the importance of prayer (Weber 1905, 289–95). The *preparation* here is fairly brief, reference is made to the last lesson, in which some characteristics of prayer have already been addressed. However, there are other aspects of prayer that can be learned from St. Monica. The *presentation* describes the relationship between Monica and her son. The focus is on her wish for him to convert to Christianity. She prays for this. However, Augustine wants to devote himself to a secular career and secretly travels from North Africa to Italy. Monica comes crying to the bishop, who encourages her to continue praying. He says that Augustine's hour of grace will come.

² Quotations in German have been translated into English by the author to ensure a better understanding in an international context.

She finally follows Augustine on his journey and he later actually converts. In the *explanation*, the nature of the prayer is worked out. Monica is taken as the prototype of a prayerful woman. Among other things, when praying, one should not think that it is useless but should pray with confidence. In the short *summary*, key points are repeated, e.g., a person prays confidently (which is important) when she fondly hopes that God will answer the prayer. In the *application*, a task is set here. The students are encouraged to read the biblical story about the Canaanite woman and her daughter (Matt 15:21–28) and work out to what extent this mother's way of praying corresponds to the characteristics of prayer (with humility, trust, and perseverance).

This marked a turning point – at least at the didactic and conceptual level: religious knowledge was no longer taught as an end in itself, but as an instrument that should enable a religious lifestyle. Göttler states: “Rather, the actual goal of catechesis and the specific goal of religious education . . . is the ability to lead an independent religious life based on a convinced Christian Catholic faith” (as quoted in Ziebertz 1997, 201). In the lesson plan presented here, this becomes clear, for example, in the fact that students are motivated to adopt certain attitudes when praying and that they should independently test what they have learned from the activity with the passage from the Bible.

With Rudolf Englert, it can be concluded that the Munich protagonists of the catechetical renewal have provided a significant impetus for the modernization of religious education in three respects: There was a new perspective on the students, insofar that their learning prerequisites became relevant and they were seen in a more active role in the learning process itself. There was also a new understanding with regard to the content: by moving away from pure memorization, the pedagogical structure of the religious education subject was initially recognized. Above all, catechists began to leave an exclusively theological perspective when they thought about new concepts of religious education. This led to an opening up to pedagogy and psychology, so that pedagogical references – alongside theology – became more important (Englert 2011, 145). This is expressed organizationally in the fact that many chairs of catechetics have been expanded to include ‘pedagogy.’ The term ‘religious education’ (*Religionspädagogik*), although first formulated in 1889 by the Protestant theologian Max Reischle (1858–1905), was not yet used in the Catholic context at this time (Kropáč 2006, 90).

The Munich proponents of a catechetical renewal have spread their ideas very successfully through conferences, teaching materials, and publications. However, this soon attracted critics who feared that the new catechetical method was betraying the Christian faith. In this context, the question of ‘dogma or child’ arose, which also characterized the further development of religious education. In the following part, this criticism and the reaction to it will be briefly described.

2. Dogma or Child?

One of the most vehement opponents of the Munich method was the theologian Johann Schraml (1855–1925). It is interesting to note that Schraml understood the new method as a synthetic approach based on the students and therefore criticized it (Ziebertz 1997, 203). He states:

Our holy religion, the individual articles of faith, orders, and sacraments are something positively given. The way in which they are presented is based on this. Faith as a doctrinal discipline, by its very nature, principally demands dissection, not composition. Only synthesis, or at least guiding synthesis, ensures, that the truth is no longer seen as a phenomenon without presuppositions, and allows it to emerge through composition “from the students and with the co-operation of the students.” Here is the clear methodological trace of modern pedagogy. . . . Synthesis as the basis and starting point of teaching means in the last analysis nothing other than methodically composing the presupposed truth. Even a Catholic methodologist is not permitted to compose in this way. (as quoted in Ziebertz 1997, 204)

Schraml’s criticism focuses on the accusation that the Munich method leads to individualization of the faith, though it is, in the opinion of the critics, in fact, given by God. This formulates a fundamental problem in religious education that still has an impact today, but is not always recognized in specialist discussions. The question is whether a child subjectively formulates its personal truth of faith or whether the truth of faith is objectively given and there can only be subjective approximations to it.

The way in which the proponents of the Munich method have dealt with the criticism shows that it was not their intention to allocate the Catholic faith to the construction of the students. For Anton Weber, the new method was a didactically well-thought-out way of presenting the content of the faith and at the same time presenting it for faithful acceptance. Joseph Göttler emphasized that the catechism would not lose its previous status and significance (as cited in Ziebertz 1997, 201 and 207). In other words, despite all the appreciation of the Munich method as an opening of religious education to students and to pedagogy and psychology, the question of ‘child or dogma’ is resolved by its proponents in favor of dogma. It was only later that an anthropological turning point occurred, in which the ‘child’ increasingly became the authority of faith. It must be stated that Schraml’s criticism of the Munich method was exaggerated, but at the same time, he recognized where such a methodological opening could lead. The individualization of religious education in the present day could be read as the fulfillment of Schraml’s fears.

3. Radicalizations around the 1970s and since the 1990s

After more than a hundred years of anti-modernism, the Catholic Church reacted to modern society, which had become more secular and pluralistic, at the Second Vatican Council with a clear focus on people and their questions and a long overdue appreciation of the human sciences. Against this backdrop, religious educators now also dared to question a primarily promulgating and catechizing religious education openly. In 1970, for example, Eugen Paul (1932–1995) called for catechetics to open up to the findings of educational science and general research on didactics and to adopt its methods (Mendl 2001; Paul 1970, 226–28). What is thematized in religious education and in what way it cannot continue to be designed exclusively from a theological perspective. To put it bluntly: “Catechetics that is designed in a one-sided fashion (e.g., from a theological perspective) no longer deserves the name, and above all: it stands no chance” (Paul 1970, 228). This was the final step towards pedagogy and the opening up to other sciences and the term ‘religious pedagogy’ (*Religionspädagogik*) was accepted. Irrespective of its affiliation with theology, it is now equally part of educational science – just like other didactic disciplines (Scheunpflug 2011, 207).

The discussion about religious education which was initiated by Paul and others was continued at the Würzburg Synod. In the Synod’s Resolution on Religious Education, which was passed on November 22, 1974, the Synod members justified the subject for the first time in pedagogical terms, i.e., in terms of its contribution to the educational goals of the school – followed by contribution from a theological point of view. This must be seen as a double turning point: On the one hand, religious education would have moved away from its missionary character in favor of a diaconal orientation. On the other hand – and related to this – the students would have moved to the center (Mendl 2010, 257).

Religious education now saw itself as a service to children and young people who were believers, seekers or struggling for faith, as well as non-believers, so that there was often talk of an anthropological turn or a turn towards the subject. This becomes particularly clear in the anthropological and societal justification of religious education enacted by the synod:

There must therefore be religious education at school . . . because school should help young people to become themselves and because religious education, through its questions about the bottom of meaning, helps them to see and perceive their own role and task in the community and in life appropriately; because school cannot be satisfied with the adaptation of the student to the administered world and because religious education is designed to relativize unjustified claims to absoluteness. (Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 1998, 159–60)

It also refers to the aspect of maturity and the ability to make decisions in the area of religion: “Religious education should enable responsible thinking and behavior with regard to religion and faith” (Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 1998, 163). The Synod already linked the turn to the subject – albeit not exclusively – with a broader concept of religion, in which it saw religious education as a privileged place for addressing the question of meaning.

In view of the rapid de-confessionalization and religious pluralization, the scientific mainstream in religious education consistently pursued subject orientation or child orientation in order to ensure connectivity to the denominational Catholic faith or at least to transcendence. This subject-orientated religious education is particularly evident in the concept of a theology of child and youth (*Kinder- und Jugendtheologie*), which discovered that students are independent and theologically productive protagonists (Knoblauch 2011). When Anton A. Bucher, one of the early pioneers of children’s theology, relates religious educational science to the theological achievements of children and stimulates the development of a ‘theology of children,’ the question of ‘child or dogma’ is finally resolved in favor of the child. On the one hand, such a ‘theology of children’ requires a change in the role of the teacher. The teacher steps back and becomes active in the classroom primarily as a source of inspiration for children’s thought processes. Originally, there was no correction of unfortunate or theologically incorrect statements, although there is now a heated debate about how to deal with this.³ On the other hand, from a didactic and methodological point of view, the aim is to exert as little direct influence as possible on children’s thought and speech testimonies and artifacts in religious education lessons. In this respect, the lessons are dominated, for example, by conversations, questions, impulses to wonder, or working on dilemma stories. This requires that children are seen as largely equal theological dialogue partners and that the boundaries between experts and laypeople are fluid. The fact that this has also led to romanticized notions of children as ‘better or actual theologians’ – for example, because they approach religious questions more intuitively – has since been self-critically considered within the child theology debate (Zimmermann 2016, 66). It should be mentioned that in addition to the ‘radical’ ‘theology of children,’ there are also forms of ‘theology with children’ – where the teacher is more in demand as a dialogue partner – as well as ‘theology for children.’ The latter sees itself more as a child-orientated teaching of theology in religious education (Zimmermann 2015).

³ Zimmermann argues that in the case of children’s theology, it should be checked whether children’s statements fulfill at least a minimum of the criteria of theological thinking (e.g., reflection, reference to faith). In addition, coherence, consensus, or the practical use of children’s statements would be important factors for determining whether they are valid arguments with a theological character. Ultimately, Zimmermann argues that not all statements made by children in the context of religious education should be categorized as children’s theology (Zimmermann 2016).

4. Consequences

The individualization of denominational religious education is a result of the didactic prioritization of the child. This development was ultimately without alternative in the course of a necessary professional integration into educational science and in view of social developments, such as increasing secularisation and pluralization, associated with a break with tradition with regard to Christianity (Halbfas 2007). Referring to Charles Taylor, Jorge B. Moniz points out the coincidence of pluralization and secularization: “. . . mutual fragilization, as a feature of societies with a high level of diversity, ‘certainly,’ causes a decline in religion – ‘as a consequence, the proportion of belief is smaller and that of unbelief is larger than ever before.’ This is because the arena where religious and secular choices compete is unbalanced in favor of the latter” (Moniz 2023, 8). But this individualization of religious education can also be affirmed from a theological perspective because the communication of faith is always dependent on the personal aspect and faith always requires the consent of the individual. Children’s theology is certainly the concept that has most clearly emphasized the focus on the child. However, the religious didactic approach of elementarization (*Elementarisierung*), which is certainly concerned with a balance of theological content and orientation towards the students, has also clearly individualized the question of truth (Schweitzer 2008, 30).

However, this individualization leads to a problem pointed out by Bernhard Grümme. He states that students’ faith – or at least their religious search – is a prerequisite for theologizing. However, Grümme continues, both can no longer be assumed in view of the advanced state of secularization. This leads to an engulfment of children by the concept of theology, whereas Children’s theology gives up its claimed subject-orientation (Zimmermann 2016, 69). Whatever one thinks of Grümme’s position, the more relevant question seems to be whether theologizing without the horizon of faith makes sense at all. Bernhard Dressler’s proposal could therefore be helpful here, as calls for a strengthening of the concept of religion in the context of denominational religious education (Zimmermann 2016, 70; Dressler 2014, 239–40). Although Mirjam Schambeck sees the actual “great moments of religious education” in the fulfillment of religion by students, lesson planning in the subject of religion should only aim to ‘cognitively’ (Schambeck 2012, 92) – and not existentially – fit religion into students’ own interpretations of life, their own behavior and actions in the world. She is right in this insofar as faith cannot be produced didactically and – if it were possible – this would not be allowed. However, denominational religious education is not only about building up knowledge and the ability to come to one’s own judgement on religious issues but, according to Annette Scheunpflug, it is also always about conveying what cannot be conveyed, i.e., the dimension of faith (Scheunpflug 2011, 109). If the horizon of faith is no longer present or desired on the part of the students and, from the point of view of the intention of the subject,

a cognitive relationship between Christian tradition and the students is sufficient from the perspective of religious educators or the demand for theological discussion already becomes the appropriation of the child by tradition, then catholic religious education has in some ways reached its didactic limits (Maier 2020, 132). This can already be seen in the fact that denominational religious education from secondary level I onwards has in fact already changed its character to learning about religion that is more connected to religious studies than to theology (Englert 2014). However, this does not seem to be enough for denominational religious education, which is concerned with “promoting Christian attitudes and behavior,” which at the same time are expressly counted among the “quality characteristics of Catholic religious education” (Bischofskonferenz, Katholische Kirche Deutschland 2006, 13). In contrast, it would be helpful for non-denominational (and compulsory) religious education if the students’ own life issues were brought into an interrelationship with religious traditions, which could offer them new perspectives for intellectual debate and could also broaden their individual horizon.⁴ In addition, the question arises as to what extent it makes sense to continue to offer increasingly factually oriented lessons under the responsibility of the Church, whereby non-denominational students – despite the relevance of religion, especially in the context of increasing migration and globalization – receive virtually no religious education. Whether a clearer opening of catholic religious education for non-denominational students, which of course must be linked to a conceptual development of this school subject in order to offer this group added value, should be discussed (Kropač, König, and Schambeck 2022; Kropač 2018).

Conclusion

The question of the primacy of dogma or child, which arose in the context of catechetical reform, appeared in connection with the opening of catechetics to pedagogy and was increasingly resolved in favor of the child. Reasons for it were the integration of religious education into the educational discourse as well as the pluralization and secularization of society. This development was required in order to avoid a ‘special religious world’ at school and to enable students to connect with the Christian tradition. This decision also made theological sense for the child, but only made sense as long as the localization in faith, or at least the search for

⁴ This was, e.g., considered in Switzerland (Schmid 2016). For this, also the discussion about the English concept of ‘learning from religion,’ developed by Johan Hull, in the Swiss context seems remarkable (Schmid 2011).

it, was still clearly perceptible.⁵ Students were able to relate to the Christian faith cognitively and existentially and thus they also shaped the Christian faith. In this respect, it can be said that Catholic religious education has also discovered the child in the context of secularization processes and conscious decisions in the field of religious educational science. This is perhaps less true in the sense of an anthropology of religious education (Blum 2013, 298–99), because – with a few exceptions⁶ – there is little reflection in religious educational science on who or what the child is. For the most part, since the 1960s, the German pedagogy of the subject has served as an orientation model, but without deeper reflection (Binder 2009). From a didactic point of view, however, the orientation towards the child is so clear that one can doubtless speak of a discovery of the child through religious education, insofar as it has been transformed from a rather passive addressee of religious education into a constructor of its own faith. References to developmental models, for example, ensure the connection to theories of childhood education, which is an important characteristic of child orientation.

If denominational religious education can no longer provide this correlation between students and faith in light of the loss of faith (*Glaubensverlust*) – to draw on a phrase from Hubertus Halfbas (2012) – then new ways must be sought for religious education – also in the interests of all students and their right to form their own views on religion. It is interesting to note here what the Chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, Bishop Georg Bätzing (2023) of Limburg, made clear in his New Year's Eve sermon on December 31, 2023. He said that the majority of people in Germany would no longer be approachable in terms of religion. This shows that secularization has reached a new level because until now, the idea still persisted that one only had to demonstrate the relevance of faith to life in order to establish this receptiveness. This is precisely what Catholic religious education has been committed to in recent decades.

In a way, Bishop Bätzing's statement sounds like a declaration of bankruptcy, which can also be empirically proven, because for around 60% of young people, the church as an institution is irrelevant and, above all, it is its social commitment in society that saves it from a complete loss of significance (Kropač 2022). Around half of all those confirmed in the Protestant Church say that they did not learn anything relevant for them while preparing for their confirmation (Handke 2022, 82). In this respect, the question arises whether secularization at its core – in relation to

5 The Shell Youth Study from 2019 states that only for 39% of catholic youth God has an important role in their life. For 41% of the same group, faith in God is not important (Kropač 2022).

6 Once in a while, educationalists point out that students are in need of religious education, because of the dangers of a consumer society (Meurer 2002). There is – in the context of religious Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) – also the demand to guide children and youth to a sustainable lifestyle, because the majority of them would not live in this way by themselves (Krahn and Schimmel 2021). This shows perhaps some relics of the motive of sin and therefore elements of a theological anthropology.

the commitment to religious institutions and teachings – is perhaps more than a loss of relevance of religion, as Jorge B. Moniz notes: “Religion has lost its unquestioned status. In my view, this is the main phenomenon of secularization that should be emphasized” (Moniz 2023, 8).

On the other hand, the decline in church attendance among young people should not lead to the hasty judgment that religion no longer plays a role for them (Kropač 2022). In addition, religion is still present in a secular context, i.e., through secular principles such as diversity, gender mainstreaming, climate protection, or the demand for social cohesion. These principles have even achieved a hegemonic status previously held by dogmas. Many decisions that people make – especially with regard to secular principles – have a lasting religious-normative character (Moniz 2023, 8–9). Finally, religious belief can also intensify conflicts (van Dellen 2016, 164). Against this background, it can be stated that religion is still relevant as a topic and that schools should therefore remain a “place of reflective engagement with the controversial phenomenon of religion” (Schambeck 2021, 222). This raises questions and challenges for future religious education, which have recently been addressed in some European countries through the establishment of new subjects that have replaced or supplemented the previous denominational religious education – most recently in Luxembourg in 2015 (Maier 2018).

Denominational religious education will have to change in order to remain relevant and attractive. Further questions will have to be asked about its organization and content: for example, whether the discussion about the usefulness of religion for personal life should be given greater weight (Schambeck 2021, 222 et seq., 227–28), whether the Church and theology need to make a ‘radical change of perspective’ toward students who are no longer religiously socialized – whether baptized or not (Handke 2022, 83) or whether the focus should be more on the individual religiousness of the students – an aspect that is mentioned in the more recent discussion about religious education in England, although this is also associated with problems, as Paul Smalley notes: “There is a question to be explored about how ‘personal’ a world-views approach to RE is. The object of study clearly cannot be the personal beliefs of a quarter of a million children in each school year, or even of the 30 individual opinions about existential matters in a particular classroom” (Smalley 2023, 215). Perhaps the concept of ‘self-transcendence’ developed by the social philosopher Hans Joas can be a clue that takes the personal experience of transcending oneself as a basis and brings it in contact with religious traditions as potential interpretations of such experiences (Joas 2004). These questions will occupy religious educators in the future. Smalley has formulated guidelines that are central to this discussion. It must be a vision that begins “with the world of the pupils, helps them consider existential questions and reflect on their own position in regard to them, having studied the fluid and multiple ways of being that exist in the world” (Smalley 2023, 222). This will

change denominational religious education – perhaps even toward an obligatory and exclusively state-run subject.

However, concrete considerations with regard to establishing a new school subject are probably rather unlikely in Germany at the moment. In fact, the fusion of Protestant and Catholic religious education in the sense of denominational cooperation or ‘Christian religious education’ is being promoted in the present. Nevertheless, if new ways of religious learning were to be considered, care would have to be taken to ensure that such a new subject is not understood in terms of civil religion. If it were, it would be orientated primarily towards social cohesion within a religiously and culturally heterogeneous society and the internalization of socially or politically desirable attitudes and beliefs. It would thus fulfill functions that the Church had assumed before the secularization processes. This new subject would then merely be a modernized version of traditional ecclesiastical religious education, which would be far more problematic because it would be almost impossible for students to avoid it. Unfortunately, this tendency can be clearly observed in the modernization of religious education in the recent past (Maier 2018). In this respect, the current denominational, perhaps ecumenically organized subject of religious education, which is decidedly orientated toward the students and whose religious denomination is to be understood as the starting point and not the goal of religious learning processes, remains not only a more realistic but also a better way for this moment (Englert 2015, 20).

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