

Ulrich Kropač

## **Religiousness and Faith**

### **A Definition of Relations from the Perspectives of (Catholic) Theology and Young People in Germany**

The following thoughts are well-grounded in theology. Consequently, a definition of the term theology and its functions will be given in the beginning (1.1). After that, observations on the relation of religiousness and faith in theology (1.2, 1.3), and in the perception of adolescents will follow (2). This leads up to a comparison (3). As a conclusion, I will sum up the findings of my reflections into three hypotheses (4.)

It is worth mentioning that the German word “Glaube” can be translated in two ways. One is “belief”, the other “faith”. For this chapter, the term “faith” seems to be the more appropriate one as it has less secular connotations. Additionally, the English term “religious” carries the meaning of two German adjectives: “gläubig” and “religiös”. To distinguish between these two terms, “gläubig” will be translated as “believing” or “faithful”, while “religiös” will be used as the translation of “religiös”. I hope that this explanation provides sufficient insight and clarity regarding the use of terms to non-German readers.

## **1 Religiousness and Faith in the Mirror of Christian Theology**

### **Theology as Science of Faith**

It may sound counterintuitive: The discipline of *Christian* theology on a university level has no connection whatsoever to religion and religiousness. It is clearly focused on faith. By faith, I mean the Christian faith in God (Horn, 2018; Horn’s book “Glaube” divides the term into seven theological disciplines; however, only Protestant authors were given the chance to contribute to this book). The faith in God is the foundation of (Christian) theology. At the same time, it strives to justify this before the forum of reason. The philosopher and theologian Anselm of Canterbury has coined the phrase ‘fides quaerens intellectum’ – ‘faith seeking understanding’ for this program. Theology is caught in the tension field between faith and rea-

son. Its reflections on faith are accomplished by using scientific methods taken from literary studies, history or philosophy, for example. In this respect, theology claims to be nothing less than the status of the *science* of belief. On its shoulders rests the responsibility for the “methodical and systematic, strictly scientifically oriented reflections on the contents of faith. The objective of this work is to convey this content to human reason in a modern, practice-oriented and forward-looking manner” (Böttigheimer, 2016, p. 633; abbreviations displayed in full text; translated).

### **Correlations of Revelation and Faith**

Whenever faith is discussed in theology, its correlate “revelation” resonates with this term. “One is unthinkable without the other. Revelation lacks purpose without faith while faith without revelation lacks its very foundation.” (Beinert, 1995, p. 74; translated). Christian faith in itself is an answer to the Word of God, to His revelation.

Within the Christian understanding, revelation is God’s self-declaration. It serves mankind by offering guidance on its way to setting themselves free and to reaching salvation. This self-declaration of God can never be considered as directly conveyed. It is always refracted through the *conditio humana*: It is God’s word wrapped into human words.

The German word “Glaube”, which can be translated as “faith” or “belief”, is often used with a belittling undertone in everyday language. For example, a common response to someone saying “ich glaube” (I believe) would be “Glauben heißt nicht wissen” (“to believe” is the opposite of “to know”). In this context, “Glaube” / “belief” seems to be a subjective and vague matter. It stands in direct contrast to knowledge and certainty. In theology, the term “faith” has an entirely different meaning. Usually it is broken down into three dimensions (Kropač, 2019, p. 141; 143):

- *fides qua*: faith as a personal and existential matter, as basic option and one of life’s choices. It is something that affects the human being as a whole
- *fides quae*: faith as content and doctrine; i.e. faith includes a cognitive element. This element is articulated in statements about faith
- *fides cum communitate*: the identification of the believer with a specific religious group

### **Theological Classification of Religiousness**

As mentioned before: The heart of theology is not religiousness but the faith in God. Still, from a theological point of view, religiousness and faith do not exist alongside one another without any connection. Their relation can, inter alia, be described as follows (Kropač, 2019, p. 142–143):

1. Religiousness logically precedes faith; it is its *conditio sine qua non*. Without religiousness, there is no faith. Therefore, “religiousness” is the less precise term when compared to the term “faith”.
2. Religiousness cannot exist without recourse to religious traditions. Despite that merely adopting elements from one or more religions does not make a person a believer.
3. A decisive criterion for clearly distinguishing religiousness from faith is a person’s feeling of belonging to a specific religious group. *Faith* does not only include an existential choice (*fides qua*) and the agreement on the content of faith (*fides quae*), but also a sense of belonging to a group that practices this faith (*fides cum communitate*). In contrast, *religiousness* as an individual ability can work without any connection to a collective.

## 2 Religiousness and Faith in Young People’s Perception

The book “Jugend – Glaube – Religion. Eine Repräsentativstudie zu Jugendlichen im Religions- und Ethikunterricht” (Schweitzer et. al., 2018) was published in 2018. The title roughly translates as “Youth – Faith – Religion. A Representative Study on Adolescents in Religious and Ethics Education in School.” For the question I am discussing in this paper, namely young people’s understanding of faith and religion (Kropač, 2015; Kropač, Meier & König, 2012; 2015), this book can be considered an exemplary reference.

### Distinction between “Religious” and “Faithful”

One of the central results of this study is the proof that young people distinguish between “religious” and “faithful”, a distinction that is not present in the English word “religious” on its own. No less noteworthy is the observation that young people’s self-description of their attitude clearly gives preference to the label “believing” not “religious”. This can be proven by numbers: In a survey documented during the study, 22 % of participants considered themselves “religious” as compared to 41 % considering themselves as “believing” (Schweitzer et al., 2018, p. 70–71). This distinction can be observed regardless of the denomination of the person questioned. For Catholic youths, the figures for their self-description as “religious” or “believing” are 22 % vs. 41 %, for Protestants 19 % vs. 37 %, for Protestants not organized within the Evangelical Church in Germany 40 % vs. 80 %, for members of Orthodox Churches 24 % vs. 52%, for Muslims 58 % vs. 73 % and for those without denomination 4 % vs. 19 % (Schweitzer et al., 2018, p. 72). As a matter of fact, a large number of young people rejected the label “religious” altogether (Schweitzer et al., 2018, p. 71; Streib & Gennerich, 2011, p. 40).

Therefore, the study supports earlier findings. In 2008, Hans-Georg Ziebertz and Ulrich Riegel proved in a survey that only 25 % of those questioned considered

themselves “religious” while 46 % described themselves as “believing” (Ziebertz & Riegel, 2008, p. 291; Ziebertz, 2017, p. 96).

### **Different Content-based Meaning of the Term “Faith”**

In the context of a study, it is hard to grasp what young people mean by the term “belief”. Quite a number of those questioned agree with the statement that to them faith consists of “having a personal relationship with God or the Divine” (Schweitzer et al., 2018, p. 245). Ideas on what God or the Divine are differ greatly. 49 % think of “something offering protection”, 47 % of “someone to speak or talk to”, 29 % each perceive God as “an energy” or “nature” (Schweitzer et al., 2018, p. 78).

72 % of participants agree with the statement: “I stand by my faith” while 52 % stated that they believed in God. In the survey, this discrepancy is interpreted as indication “that the term ‘belief’ sometimes means more than just the belief in God” (Schweitzer et al., 2018, p. 74). Unfortunately, information on what one could believe in, apart from God, is not given.

## **3 Comparison: Religiousness and Faith from a Theological Perspective and from the Perspective of Young People**

### **Reversal of Semantics**

The meaning attributed to the terms “religious” and “believing/faithful” by adolescents reverses established theological semantics. In theology, “religiousness” is the wider and “faith” the narrower term. This can be summed up into a compact formula: Anyone believing may also be considered religious, but vice versa not every religious person is a believer.

Adolescents mainly associate religiousness with “living religion bound to church” (Ziebertz, 2017, p. 96). On the one hand, they put religiousness into the context of religious institutions. Institutions for which they feel a considerable amount of scepticism. On the other hand, to them, belief is “the wider term” (Ziebertz, 2017, p. 96).

### **Young People’s Notion of Faith – Measured through Theological Standards**

What is to be gained by putting young people’s notion of faith into relation to the theological concept of faith? For this, a well-established theological pattern will be used. It differentiates between *fides qua*, *fides quae* and *fides cum communitate*:

1. The faith of adolescents is individual to the highest degree. At the same time, the distance towards the church and to religious institutions is big. In many cases, there can be no talk of a *fides cum communitate* in terms of a

theological perspective. Nevertheless, it should be taken in consideration that even the faith of young people can be dependent on temporary (possibly changing) communities (e. g. peers).

2. Young people's faith is hard to grasp on a content level. As I just outlined, to them, faith is partly more than the faith in God and also different to it. When looking at the further development of faith the study "Jugend – Glaube – Religion" shows a rise in acceptance of an impersonal image of God. In addition, a declining faith in an afterlife is evident (Schweitzer et al., 2018, p. 26–28). Summing up, the classical *fides quae* is suffering a severe thinning out.
3. The aspect of *fides qua* appears the most useful when surveying young people's faith. In this aspect, the study proves that for a significant percentage of adolescents, individual faith is experienced as support in everyday life as well as in crises. To some, it has existential quality. For a similar proportion of adolescents, the opposite is true: For them, God plays a role neither in everyday life nor in difficult situations in life (Schweitzer et al., 2018, p. 74; 245).

In conclusion: Young people's notion of faith has little to do with the theological basic concept by the same name. Their notion of faith could be characterized as *independent religiousness*.

## 4 Summary and Outlook

Three hypotheses summarize these earlier considerations and carry them further:

1. In isolation, statements such as "young people are or are not believers" have almost no epistemic value. The context of these statements is crucial, as are the definitions of faith and religiousness that are used as a basis.
2. For research focusing on the question whether young people believe in a *theological sense*, catalogues of questions should be designed. These should reflect the triad of *fides qua*, *fides quae* and *fides cum communitate*:
  - What are the implications of one's faith on self-perception and lifestyle?
  - How can the content of faith be measured? Which dogmas and religious attitudes of morality are known to young people and shared by them?
  - How does participation in the life of a religious group take place, provided that there is any? What is the role of religious institutions for individuals?
3. If young people's notion of faith – which is from a theological perspective more precisely defined as "religiousness" – is what the research focuses on, questions that connect personal beliefs to church or religious institutions are problematic. This has been substantiated amongst others by the study "Jugend – Glaube – Religion", which I referred to several times. For example, it says: "It should be highlighted that more than half of the people inter-

viewed and almost half of church members state that their belief is entirely independent from church. Again, this clearly shows that a large proportion of youths differentiate between personal religiousness and religiousness in institutions” (Schweitzer et al., 2018, p. 88; translated). The same holds true for the survey “Was mein Leben bestimmt? Ich?. Lebens- und Glaubenswelten junger Menschen heute” (roughly translated: “What governs my life? Me. Young people’s worlds of life and beliefs today”). It was also published in 2018 by the Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (roughly translated: *Institute for Social Sciences of the Protestant Church in Germany*). During this study, the statement “über das, was ich glaube, entscheide ich selbst” (“I decide for myself what I believe in”) received the approval of 52 % of participants (Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut, 2018, p. 16). This clearly shows that adolescents widely consider faith to be an autonomous implementation.

In empirical surveys, questions that aim at the institutionalized character of religion are, therefore, ambivalent: On the one hand, they are a central indication for identifying faith in a theological sense. On the other hand, they are a distraction if the topic is the independent religiousness of adolescents. Consequently, it is essential to be very careful when formulating and implementing them for empirical studies.

## References

- Beinert, W. (1995). Theologische Erkenntnislehre [Theological epistemology]. In W. Beinert (Ed.), *Glaubenszugänge: Lehrbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik, 1* (pp. 45–197). Ferdinand Schöningh.
- Böttigheimer, C. (2016). *Lehrbuch der Fundamentaltheologie: Die Rationalität der Gottes-, Offenbarungs- und Kirchenfrage* [Course book of fundamental theology: The rationality of the God-, revelation- and church question] (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Herder.
- Horn, F. W. (Ed.) (2018). *Glaube* [Faith]. Mohr Siebeck.
- Kropač, U. (2015). Religiosität, Jugendliche [Religiosity, adolescent]. *Das wissenschaftlich-religionspädagogische Lexikon im Internet*. doi: 10.23768/wirelex.Religiosität\_Jugendliche.100087.
- Kropač, U. (2019). *Religion – Religiosität – Religionskultur: Ein Grundriss religiöser Bildung in der Schule* [Religion – Religiosity – Religious culture: An outline on religious education in school]. Kohlhammer.
- Kropač, U., Meier, U., & König, K. (Eds.). (2012). *Jugend, Religion, Religiosität: Resultate, Probleme und Perspektiven der aktuellen Religiositätsforschung* [Adolescence, religion, religiosity: Results, problems and perspectives of current research on religiosity]. Friedrich Pustet.
- Kropač, U., Meier, U., & König, K. (Eds.). (2015). *Zwischen Religion und Religiosität: Ungebundene Religionskulturen in Religionsunterricht und kirchlicher Jugendarbeit – Erkundungen und Praxis* [Between religion and religiosity: unbound

religious cultures in religious education and church youth work – explorations and practice]. Echter.

Schweitzer, F., Wissner, G., Bohner, A., Nowack, R., Gronover, M., & Boschki, R. (2018). *Jugend – Glaube – Religion: Eine Repräsentativstudie zu Jugendlichen im Religions- und Ethikunterricht* [Adolescence – faith – religion: A representative study on adolescents in religious and ethical education]. Waxmann.

Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (2018). *“Was mein Leben bestimmt? Ich!”: Lebens- und Glaubenswelten junger Menschen heute* [What governs my life? Me. Young people’s worlds of life and belief today]. creo-media.

Streib, H., & Gennerich, C. (2011). *Jugend und Religion: Bestandsaufnahmen, Analysen und Fallstudien zur Religiosität Jugendlicher* [Youth and religion. Stocktaking, analyses and case studies on the religiosity of adolescents]. Juventa.

Ziebertz, H.-G. (2017). Gesellschaftliche und jugendsoziologische Herausforderungen für die Religionsdidaktik [Challenges of society and adolescent Sociology for religious teachings]. In G. Hilger, S. Leimgruber & H. G. Ziebertz (Eds.), *Religionsdidaktik: Ein Leitfaden für Studium, Ausbildung und Beruf* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.) (pp. 76–105). Kösel.

Ziebertz, H.-G., & Riegel, U. (2008). Letzte Sicherheiten. Eine empirische Untersuchung zu Weltbildern Jugendlicher [Last securities. An empirical study on youth world views]. Gütersloher Verlagshaus.