

Encounter and Comparison Complementary Perspectives for Religious Education?

1. Introduction

The present volume is dedicated to the concept of encounter in religious education. Its purpose is to analyze this concept in respect to its possible meaning for the praxis of religious education and also in respect to its implications for the theory of religious education. In the following, I want to further clarify the meaning of encounter by considering the parallels and differences between encounter and comparison in the context of religious education. In doing so, I am interested in the theory as well as in the praxis of religious education because I am convinced that encounter and comparison should play a stronger role in research and in teaching.

In the context of religious education, encounter can just mean to meet another person but most often it refers to the relationship between different cultures or religions. Sometimes the concept aims at such relationships in general, like in the case of the relationship between Turkish and German culture or between Islam and Christianity as they encounter each other, for example, in contemporary Germany where I live and work. More often, encounter means a personal relationship between individual people who belong to different cultures or religions, who have been influenced by different cultures or religions, who have different cultural or religious backgrounds or represent different cultures or religions. Even these brief introductory remarks can raise a number of important questions. Is it accurate to speak of encounter as relationship? Does every encounter lead to a relationship that deserves its name? What does it mean to come from a cultural or religious background and to represent a culture or religion? etc. All these points refer to open questions and to serious issues. Yet one thing is clear from the beginning: As an approach to religious education encounter should lead to mutual understanding and respect between different cultures and religions. In this sense, it is closely connected to the interest in intercultural and interreligious education and learning.

Yet encounter is not the only concept to be found in this context. The interest in intercultural and interreligious education is also connected to the concept of comparison. In the field of religious education, comparisons between different cultures and religions are often thought of as one important way of fostering mutual understanding and respect. Increasingly, the comparative study of religion has had its effect on the religious education curriculum in many countries – with the famous Birmingham syllabus as a pioneer achievement (cf. Hull 1984, pp. 113-116), and the theology of religions has been another factor in making the comparative study of religion a field of growing influence in religious education. In this sense, encounter and comparison may be considered related concepts, and it might be

helpful to examine their relationship more closely in terms of religious education in order to gain new insights about their meaning and their relationship to each other. In my own work, the need for becoming clearer about encounter and comparison is also connected to my experience as a co-editor of the German yearbook of religious education. In 2005, we put together a volume on “Learning through Encounter” in this series (*Lernen durch Begegnung*, Bizer et al. 2005). One of the important experiences in planning and editing this volume was that actually very little work has been done in terms of clarifying the meaning of encounter and comparison in religious education. There clearly is, for example, a growing interest in international comparative work in religious education, with ISREV – the *International Seminar on Religious Education and Values* inaugurated by John Hull more than 33 years ago – as a prime example. Yet there have been few attempts of defining or analysing systematically the ways in which such work will be helpful for religious education in different countries. Similarly, the meaning of encounter or *Begegnung* has not been studied sufficiently in this field (Rickers 2005). This editorial experience indicates the need for analysing the concepts of encounter and comparison. Moreover, I will draw on the various contributions in the yearbook volume as possible illustrations and as a source for experiential reports as well as for scholarly insights.

As indicated above, a more extensive study than I can offer here would have to cover a wide range of topics and questions. The concept of encounter actually has a long history, among others, in philosophy and psychology (see the chapter by Hans-Günter Heimbrock in the present volume for some of these aspects). Comparative research is an established methodology that is in use in many different fields of study – in history as well as in sociology and political science, in religious studies as well as in education or other academic research (for a current overview cf. Kaelble & Schriewer 2003). My own contribution will be limited to four points that may shed some light on the relationship between encounter and comparison and that might also serve as a starting point for future work. The first section offers a conceptual analysis, the second refers to the praxis of religious education. The third section has its focus on academic research in religious education. In the last section, I will offer a number of conclusions and some perspectives for the future.

2. Encounter and Comparison: Conceptual Analysis

In order to grasp the meaning of encounter and comparison it is helpful to take up these concepts in general before looking into their use in religious education. In doing so, the first impression certainly will be that encounter and comparison are quite different concepts. They represent two different modes of perceiving and dealing with the other. To some degree, these two modes even seem to contradict each other in that they presuppose very different or contradictory perspectives. Encounter is based on a first and second person perspective (*you and me* or, probably more exactly, *I and thou*) while comparison works from a third person perspec-

tive (*it and they*). In this sense, the two concepts cannot be reconciled. They designate not only different perspectives but also different attitudes, motives, and mindsets. To really be with the other is very different from thinking or speaking about the other.

Encounter requires the co-presence of at least two persons. Even in the case that what is encountered is not a concrete person but, for example, a different culture or religion, encounter at least refers to the immediacy of personal involvement. I cannot encounter another person or entity without allowing myself to be influenced, affected or even altered by the encounter. Moreover, encounter implies that the outcome of this process of being affected or altered cannot be predicted or predefined. Encounter requires openness and availability – making oneself available to others. This is what makes encounter risky and fascinating at the same time. There often is an element of newness and of the unknown in encounter. Encounter can have a strong impact on the persons involved but the nature of this impact cannot be controlled in advance.

Comparison does not require any of that. It can be done at a personal and temporal distance. Some people, for example in the field of the comparative study of religion, even claim that comparative research makes inner distance mandatory because all personal involvement might distort the results of the research and might jeopardize the objectivity of knowledge. In this case, distance in the sense of objectivity is considered the decisive characteristic of a religious study approach as opposed to theological approaches that presuppose personal involvement. The religious studies approach makes the third person perspective (*it and they*) its guiding model while theology implies a normative basis that is of an existential nature (*I and Thou*).

The different modes of encounter and comparison can be conceptualised, among others, in terms of Martin Buber's philosophy. In his famous writings on the dialogical principle, Buber (1973) refers to the I-Thou-relationship. His way of rendering this relationship captures the immediacy and mutual involvement of encounter in a classic manner. He distinguishes between the I-Thou and the I-It as the two basic ways of human speech. According to Buber, the Thou does not have an object. The I-Thou strictly belongs to the world of interpersonal relationship. Encounter as realization of the I-Thou-relationship means that there is nothing but the immediate presence of the other. Whatever comes in between the I and Thou of this relationship would only hinder or diminish this relationship. I-Thou and I-It are mutually exclusive.

Buber's understanding of dialogical encounter tends towards the mystical. For him, even a tree can become a Thou. This indicates that the immediacy of encounter and the distance connected to comparison in the service of objectivity ultimately imply different understandings of reality and different attitudes vis-à-vis reality. The two concepts refer to different epistemologies and very different types of research (if encounter in the sense of Buber's notion of the I-Thou-relationship really allows for research, it will certainly not be a type of research in the sense of science, neutrality and objectivity). Encounter and comparison certainly should not

be confused and should be kept separate from each other. The two concepts may refer to parallel interests, for example, in religious education but this changes nothing about their different nature. Encounter does not mean comparison – comparison does not equal encounter.

Yet more needs to be said about the relationship between encounter and comparison. The understanding of encounter presented so far can be called phenomenological rather than empirical. The aim was to bring out the nature of encounter and comparison as purely as possible – to look into what traditional phenomenology called their true essence (cf. in the context of religious education, the contributions in Heimbrock 1998). Yet there is a difference between what encounter and comparison mean as concepts in terms of philosophical analysis and how their equivalents show up empirically in the context of everyday life. Empirically, there is no pure I-Thou-relationship. There always are elements of not just looking into the eyes of the other but of also thinking about him or her. Encounter can be thought of as a brief time-span that is necessarily limited. The immediacy of encounter cannot last forever. It is followed by more mundane attitudes, by thinking about the encounter and what it might mean for me. Trying to make sense of the encounter experience involves stepping outside the immediacy of just being with the other in order to gain some outside vantage point for looking at the relationship between myself and the other person. Empirically, encounter and comparison do mix, in spite of their different character.

In this sense, we can also say that encounter actually implies comparison. I have to compare the other with me in order to understand the other. Let us take the encounter of two people with different religious backgrounds as an example. To encounter the faith of the other certainly is an important step towards understanding the other but understanding inevitably involves comparing my own faith to the faith of the other. Moreover, my understanding of the other's faith will not be disturbed but will most likely be deepened if I am willing to learn about his or her religious tradition. Knowledge of this tradition can open up possibilities for understanding the meaning of certain words, ideas or rites that are part of the other person's ways of expressing his or her faith. Moreover, such knowledge can hardly be acquired without a constant eye to my own faith. Comparison can help encounter by giving it a broader basis and background. Comparison can be the natural sequel to encounter.

Or, to put it into a nutshell: Encounter implies and leads on to comparison. Encounter can also motivate comparison. Comparison can deepen the encounter. Consequently, contrary to the first conclusion above, encounter and comparison should not be kept separate but should be connected so that they can strengthen each other.

Rather than pursuing this conceptual analysis in more detail, I now want to move on to religious education. What do the two concepts mean in this context? Should they be kept apart or can they go together?

3. Mutual Implication of Encounter and Comparison in the Praxis of Religious Education?

In my understanding, the mutual implication of encounter and comparison also holds true for the praxis of religious education. While it is probably fair to say that the praxis of religious education has incorporated more impulses from comparative religion than it has provided possibilities for encounter, the mutual implication of encounter and comparison still applies to it as well. This can be seen from a number of considerations.

To put it critically: Religious education as comparative religion runs the risk of becoming shallow and superficial if it never takes the step of encountering the other in person. In this case, religious education most of all means acquiring knowledge about different religions, be it through more traditional media like texts or be it through more modern media like movies and other materials. What is of decisive importance is the intention of this kind of teaching. Educators who follow this model often do so with the hope that knowledge about different religions will lead to tolerance. They consider the comparative study of religion as a type of Enlightenment and as a possibility for developing rational conceptions of religion. Especially the awareness of religious plurality and of the different and often contradictory beliefs found in different religions should keep students from becoming intolerant or fundamentalist. Yet it is easy to see that tolerance based on the comparative study of religion must come to stand the test of really welcoming the other not only in our thoughts but also into our own presence, not only in terms of abstract knowledge but also in terms of personal encounter. In this sense, comparison in religious education must lead on to encounter. Encounter represents the real-life version of comparative religion.

Yet it is also true for religious education that encounter depends on comparison. The comparative study of different religions can equip students with the knowledge that they need for making sense of what they encounter. Moreover, it should equip them with principles and criteria that allow them to deal with their experiences in relationship to different religions. Comparison without encounter remains empty – encounter without comparison remains blind.

Most clearly, encounter alone cannot do justice to the aims of religious education in terms of contemporary theories of education. Encounter by itself is not necessarily educational. Education requires not only relationship or experience. It also requires considered judgment which can be the basis of personal autonomy. Such judgment certainly depends on being able to take the perspective of the other in order to think through, for example, how one's own point of view will look from the other's point of view. In addition to this, it also depends on the ability to coordinate personal feelings and impressions with academic knowledge, be it about different religious traditions or be it from other fields like ethics, political science, the philosophy of religion, etc. In this respect, the combination of encounter and comparison stands for the need of including different perspectives in religious education – the perspective of the insider as well as the perspective of the outsider,

the perspective of the faithful believer as well as the perspective of the detached observer. In John Hull's terminology (Hull 1998), we could also say that comparison and encounter represent two complementary ways of learning – learning about religion and learning from religion, detached ways of learning and existential ways of learning.

The accounts on learning through encounter in the German yearbook of religious education mentioned above (Bizer et al. 2005) indicate that school settings might not be the best place for encounter. It is no coincidence that the most impressive reports on encounter in this volume come from settings beyond the classroom – for example, so-called immersion experiences in a different cultural context (like young Germans going to Latin America to live and work with the people there, Blum & Hilgers 2005) or so-called encounter programs for adolescents and adults from countries that have or had been enemy nations for decades (for example, from France and Germany after the First and Second World War, Stambolis 2005). Yet it is also obvious that some of the positive examples from such encounters can serve as a stimulus for schools as well. Schools and religious education classes can take part in youth exchange programs that allow for encounter (Dam 2005). They can work towards bringing together people from separate groups (like Christians and Muslims, Knauth & Tatari 2005; groups from school music and church music in the former GDR where contacts between the atheistic state school and religious institutions used to be out of the question, Degen 2005), etc. Programs in the context of so-called diaconical learning – internships for students, for example, in retirement homes and in institutions that cater to handicapped people – indicate that students will benefit most from them if the programs work with a dual approach of having the students encounter the praxis of such institutions in person but of also running more theoretical programs in the classroom that take up the questions arising in the praxis situations (Kuld & Gönzheimer 2000). Such a dual approach can also be interpreted as an example of combining encounter and comparison.

Recent discussions in Germany in relationship to the religious study type *LER* in Brandenburg that has been introduced there as a replacement of religious education, also shed an interesting light on the limits of encounter in a school context. The Brandenburg approach is based on religious neutrality and on teaching about religion. Yet in order to also allow at least for some kind of first hand encounter with different religions, this model includes the possibility of inviting a representative, for example, from the Protestant church to the school. The encounter will normally be limited to the time of a regular lesson, i.e., to 45 minutes squeezed in between, say, mathematics and sports. It is quite clear from the beginning that the impact of this kind of encounter will hardly be able to leave a lasting impression on anyone.

4. Encounter and Comparison in Research on Religious Education

Academic research in religious education should always be related to the praxis of religious education. In this sense, encounter and comparison must also play a role in research if they are present in this praxis. Yet in this paragraph, I do not want to dwell upon this obvious relationship between theory and praxis. Instead, I want to focus on the role of encounter and comparison in terms of academic work itself. In doing so, I want to make the claim that the mutual implication of encounter and comparison that holds true for the praxis of religious education, should also be respected in research on religious education for methodological reasons. In other words, research in religious education is in need of both, encounter and comparison, because both concepts have methodological implications that are important for this research.

In recent years, the idea of encounter, for example, at international conferences like ISREV has become very prominent. International discussions have become a regular part of the work of academic religious education. Meeting colleagues from other countries and backgrounds has proven to be a highly stimulating experience that can be seen as another variety of learning through encounter. While international contacts and cooperation actually have a long – and mostly forgotten – history in religious education and while the corresponding ideas received a lot of new support from the ecumenical movement in the first decades of the twentieth century, religious education discussions especially after World War II tended to be confined to national audiences (cf. the brief historical overview in Schweitzer 2005). Against this background, the recent processes of internationalisation in religious education should be considered an important step in the right direction. The contemporary situation of globalization makes it mandatory to include more international and global perspectives with the work of religious education (Osmer & Schweitzer 2003).

The experience of meeting colleagues from other countries, from different cultural or religious backgrounds obviously is considered very valuable by many religious educators. Again, encounter means being challenged and affected in ways that are different from just reading articles, books, or websites from authors who one will never meet in person. This is one of the reasons why international networks in religious education have rightly become so important and are still proliferating. At least in terms of international conferences, encounter has been successfully established in religious education over the last 20 or 30 years. Consequently, to some degree, religious education has become an international discipline (for parallel processes in the field of practical theology cf. Schweitzer & van der Ven 1999), even if the majority of the publications in this field do not yet reflect an international basis or audience.

If academic work in religious education really can be called an international enterprise, this is most true for the international consultations and conferences. I think it is fair to say that we have not come quite as far in terms of comparative research

in religious education (cf. Schweitzer 2004, 2005 for an overview). For the most part, in spite of the successful attempts of internationalisation mentioned above and also in spite of important exceptions (to just mention a few of them: Ziebertz & Kay 2005; Heimbrock 2004; Jackson 2004), discussions in religious education are still fairly national not only in terms of their audiences and in terms of the data used in empirical studies but also in terms of their participants as well as in terms of the specific praxis addressed by them. There are obvious reasons for this limitation. Many of the parameters of educational policies are still set at a national level. Even within the European Union, for example, that can be considered an international body or space, education is treated as a national matter that should not be subject to policies of the Union. At the same time, transnational and global factors certainly influence education and educational policies. The influence of international student assessment is one of the more obvious examples for such influences (and there can be no question that religious education must react to such influences, for example, by setting forth international standards and professional requirements for religious education, Schweitzer 2002). The effects of international economic competition most likely exert even more influence on education in any country at this point. To the degree that this is true, comparative research becomes necessary because the transnational forces that shape education cannot be studied at a national level alone. There is a clear need for studying the impact of such forces by looking at how they affect religious education in several different countries.

In the present context, we can affirm that comparative research is a logical way of making international encounters in religious education a more continuous and steady experience. Similar to the role of comparison in the praxis of religious education, comparison can deepen international encounters in the field of academic research. At the same time, encounter often motivates comparison.

In my understanding, encounter and comparison should apply to different levels in religious education – to different countries, to different denominations as well as to different religions. In all these cases, comparative approaches can yield information and insights that cannot be reached as long as one studies only one context. Paralleling the methodology of comparative education and comparative approaches in other fields of academic work (cf. Kaelble & Schriewer 2003; Konrad 2005), one could introduce the term comparative religious education as an umbrella for the different possibilities of comparison in religious education.

5. Conclusions and Perspectives for the Future

The aim of the present chapter stated in the beginning is to become clearer about the meaning of encounter and relationship in terms of religious education. At the end, I want to summarize some of the main results from my analysis of the two concepts. Moreover, I want to suggest some perspectives for future work.

The main result of the present chapter can be summarized by stating that the concepts of encounter and comparison are indeed complementary perspectives for

the theory and praxis of religious education and that consequently both perspectives are needed in this field. Yet in saying this, we should not forget that encounter and comparison are two different modes which, at least to some degree, contradict each other and refer to different epistemologies. Encounter and comparison cannot replace each other. Both concepts refer to an approach of its own right and with promises of its own. Yet it is easy to see that the two modes are not mutually exclusive. Encounter can lead on to comparison and it can motivate comparison. Comparison can deepen encounter and provide a basis for encounter. The relationship between encounter and comparison implies that religious education – as a serious part of education in general – can profit from encounter but that encounter by itself cannot fulfil the aims of education. Encounter is not educational in itself but it can yield experiences that are highly important for education. It will be a very important task for future work to become clearer about the exact place of encounter within the process of education as a whole, and comparison may well serve as a link between encounter and education.

If we are interested in affirming the role of religious education within the processes of internationalisation and globalization – be it in the European Union or beyond – we should work towards the combination of encounter and comparison, of international dialogue and comparative research. It is probably fair to say that both approaches have not been given sufficient attention in the past, neither in the theory of religious education nor in praxis. Therefore another main result of my analysis points to the need to emphasize both approaches more strongly. The mutual implication of encounter and comparison could be a guideline for the process of making encounter and comparison a regular part of religious education. It is an open question, however, how this can be achieved in a classroom situation which appears to only allow for very limited experiences of encounter.

I want to conclude this chapter with a personal note – by giving my special tribute to John Hull: If there is anyone in the worldwide field of religious education who stands for encounter and comparison – for bringing together people from different national, denominational, and religious backgrounds – for providing a basis for dialogue between all of them – if there is anyone who deserves our applause for having invested an endless amount of energy into the international project of religious education as encounter and comparison – it is our distinguished colleague and friend John Hull.

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