

THE HERMENEUTIC CONDITION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

This chapter attempts a fresh look at the relationship between religious education and hermeneutics. For this purpose, a reconstruction of the role of hermeneutics in religious education (in the German Protestant tradition) is offered. It is helpful to distinguish between different stages of this relationship which can be described as 'historical hermeneutics', 'hermeneutics of the contemporary world', and 'hermeneutics of the active subject'. These different stages are often considered as evidence of the discontinuities characteristic of the volatile character of this field – in fact, the term hermeneutics is often reserved for the first stage which I call 'historical hermeneutics' while the second and third are called 'problem-oriented religious education' and 'developmentalism/constructivism'. However, it will be pointed out that the sequence of these stages can actually be understood as following a continuous path and a single direction. How can this path be identified? How can it be explained? And what can be said about its direction?

Such questions lead on to more far-reaching considerations about the meaning of hermeneutics for religious education. Is it adequate to speak of a 'hermeneutic approach' to religious education? Or is it more appropriate to speak – using a problematic concept – of a 'hermeneutic paradigm'? Another possibility which is suggested in this paper is to refer to the 'hermeneutic condition' of religious education: that is to say, the close relationship between religious education and hermeneutics is not a matter of choice. Instead, it is in fact a presupposition, which comes with the time or era in which we are living. If this is true, we must reconsider the ways that different approaches are used in religious education, doing justice to the insight that, in the first place, hermeneutics is not a method for interpreting texts but rather is a specific way of thinking and of relating to tradition.

The final section of this paper will address the question of practical consequences for religious education. Is it more than a purely academic enterprise to rethink the meaning of hermeneutics for religious education? Can teachers actually profit from becoming aware of the 'hermeneutic condition' of religious education? In what ways might they profit?

In the standard textbook account of religious education in Germany, hermeneutics has a clearly defined but limited place. Hermeneutic religious

education is considered a phase or stage in the sequence of different approaches to religious education, which were dominant models in the second half of the twentieth century. In this case, hermeneutic religious education means the educational adoption of the insights gained by historical-critical research on the Bible in exegetical research, which in the 1950s and 1960s, was quite a revolutionary step. While this kind of exegesis has continued to play some role for religious education, the stage of hermeneutic religious education is usually considered as ending in the 1960s when new and different ideas entered the picture¹.

It is easy to see that the reference to this stage in the recent history of German religious education cannot answer the question of how religious education and hermeneutics are related on a more systematic level. Referring to hermeneutics as a limited stage does not do justice to the continuing interest in the relationship between hermeneutics and religious education to which, among others, the various contributions of the present volume give ample testimony.

THE HERMENEUTIC TURN IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: LIMITED STAGE OR PERMANENT STRUCTURE?

In order to understand what is called the ‘hermeneutic turn’ in German religious education, we first have to briefly consider the time before this turn. In the German Protestant tradition, the decades between the 1920s and the 1960s were dominated by a type of religious education which was based on the idea of proclamation. Influenced by Barthian (neo-orthodox) as well as by neo-Lutheran theology and motivated or alarmed by the major crises connected to both World Wars, religious educators were interested in finding an understanding of their task which would allow for critical distance towards the cultural synthesis attempted by theologians at the beginning of the century. The focus of their work moved away from issues of culture and personality. Instead, the Bible, church hymns, and prayer became the centre of a renewed religious education (which actually called itself Evangelical Instruction in order to stay away from the modernist term religion). In the context of the present book, it is important to add that, in this case, teaching the Bible meant listening for its revelatory content and treating it as a true authority – an authority that

1. Cf. R.R. OSMER – F. SCHWEITZER, *Religious Education Between Modernization and Globalization. New Perspectives on the United States and Germany*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2003.

was also witnessed to by the teacher. In Evangelical Instruction, teaching the Bible was not a hermeneutic enterprise.

It is against this background of religious education as proclamation and of Evangelical Instruction that the hermeneutic turn took place in German religious education starting in the late 1950s. Authors like Martin Stallmann suggested that religious education as a school subject could not be based on proclamation². Rather, it should be based on the ideas of history and tradition, of introducing the next generation to the cultural heritage and also to the sources from which insights into this heritage must be gained. In this view, religious education remains focussed on the Bible as the main document of the Christian tradition but, compared to Evangelical Instruction, the Bible is seen differently and teaching the Bible took on a very different meaning. Following the basic understanding of all modern exegesis, the Bible was then perceived and treated as an historical document which does not speak directly to today's people but which is in need of interpretation. Moreover, this historical document is put on trial by modern critical thinking, which relies on the natural sciences as well as on various kinds of philosophical, sociological and psychological criticisms. All of this was not new at that time but referred back to the approaches developed by the historical-critical study of the Bible since roughly the eighteenth century. What was new, however, was the deliberate attempt of not keeping this kind of thinking away from children and of not relying on an exclusively edifying use of the Bible in the classroom. The new mode for religious education was interpretation rather than proclamation, preaching, or edification. And interpretation meant working with historical documents rather than with a holy book.

It is still fascinating to read and to re-examine, for example, the analyses of Hans Stock who was another representative of this hermeneutic religious education. Perhaps there has never been a more thorough attempt of connecting religious education and modern exegesis. It is Stock's conviction that the "gap between academic theology and school religious education must be bridged"³. Prime examples for this new approach come from the research on the synoptic gospels which Stock wants to do justice to in classroom work no less than in an academic setting. Modern exegesis becomes one of the main sources for religious education.

2. See M. STALLMANN, *Christentum und Schule*, Stuttgart, Schwab, 1958. See also his *Die biblische Geschichte im Unterricht: Katechetische Beiträge*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963.

3. See H. STOCK, *Studien zur Auslegung der synoptischen Evangelien im Unterricht*, Gütersloh, Mohn, 1959, p. 9.

Thus, it is actually justified to speak of “modern” exegesis here in more than one way. First, this term refers indeed, as mentioned above, to the exegesis developed in modernity, under the impact of the Enlightenment confronting the Bible. And second, it refers to “modern man” who is faced with the “enormous task” of creating an “order for social life” and of taking responsibility for this order onto himself, “as if there was no God” and “without metaphysical support or comfort”⁴. In line with this understanding of “modern man”, students are no longer treated as faithful believers, interested in deepening their faith. Instead, they are taken seriously as non-believers or, in any case, young people who feel that their doubts by far outweigh their Christian convictions.

In spite of its merits, hermeneutic religious education remained a short-lived enterprise in Germany. This was mainly due to two reasons. First, hermeneutic religious education fully adhered to the traditional understanding that religious education must be Biblical instruction. At a time like the 1960s, when history and tradition increasingly tended to be identified with backwardness and failing to face up to the future, this focus on the Bible did not appear very attractive to many students. Second, the experiences of contemporary people in general and of children and adolescents in particular did not play a major role in this understanding of hermeneutic religious education. The reference to “modern man” mentioned above remained very abstract. Consequently, students tended to feel alienated from the subject, which appeared distant and foreign to them.

Both shortcomings of the hermeneutic approach were directly addressed by the approach which came to replace its precursor around 1970 – the *thematic or problem-oriented approach*. Instead of focussing on the Bible, religious educators made themes and problems from the contemporary world the new centre of their teaching. Influential representatives of this problem-oriented religious education like Hans Bernhard Kaufmann or Karl Ernst Nipkow referred to the need of doing religious education in close relationship to today’s experiences and outlooks which are shaped by tendencies like rational views of the world, the growing influence of the natural sciences, secularisation, etc.⁵.

Although problem-oriented religious education did not remain the dominant approach for more than a few years, it still continues to operate as

4. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

5. See H.B. KAUFMANN (ed.), *Streit um den problemorientierten Unterricht in Schule und Kirche*, Frankfurt, Diesterweg, 1973; and K.E. NIPKOW, *Christlicher Glaubensunterricht in der Säkularität – Die zwei didaktischen Grundtypen des evangelischen Religionsunterrichts*, in *Id.*, *Schule und Religionsunterricht im Wandel. Ausgewählte Studien zur Pädagogik und Religionspädagogik*, Heidelberg, Quelle & Meyer, 1971, pp. 236-263.

a general background in curriculum construction. There is basically no German religious education curriculum which does not include at least some topics like “drugs”, “dreams of life”, “social justice”, etc. But what has clearly changed since the 1970s is that the perspectives of the children and adolescents themselves have come to play a much bigger role. With problem-oriented religious education it clearly was the teachers or other adults who stated the “problems” to be treated in class. Opposed to this, many of today’s religious educators are trying to ask about what the students themselves perceive as a problem or as a question of interest. This new way of looking at things through the eyes of the students is a characteristic which is shared by most of the current approaches into which problem-oriented religious education has branched out in the 1980s and 1990s. Be it the *didactics of religious symbols*, the *developmental-psychological approaches*, *semiotic*, *phenomenological*, or *constructivist* approaches – all of them are interested in how children and youth actively perceive and construct the world, including their own life-worlds no less than the meaning of a Biblical text or a religious symbol.

What does the development of religious education in Germany, which I have just presented in a short-hand manner, tell us about the relationship between religious education and hermeneutics? I want to suggest several responses to this question:

(1) According to the standard reading of this development, the so-called hermeneutical phase had to be overcome. This understanding also is in line with a very influential methodological model from general education. This model claims that the traditional focus on research methods from hermeneutics must be broadened in order to include empirical and critical methods⁶. In this view, hermeneutics has made an important yet limited contribution to religious education.

(2) Clearly this view of expanding hermeneutics does not do justice to the fact that hermeneutic methods continue to play an important role in religious education, not only through the continuing influence of modern exegesis but also with a hermeneutics of symbols, metaphors, and narrative or with a social-scientific hermeneutics of the life-world. A second response to the question about religious education and hermeneutics could be that, while the epoch of religious education dominated by hermeneutics has come to an early end, this was only the beginning of a long-term role for hermeneutics as a background or even basis for religious education. Additional reasons speak for this understanding,

6. See W. KLAFFKI, *Erziehungswissenschaft als kritisch-konstruktive Theorie: Hermeneutik – Empirie – Ideologiekritik*, in *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 17 (1971) 351-385.

for example, the fact that hermeneutics has turned into a multiple field of different hermeneutical approaches and methods which, in turn, have become an important partner for practical theology and religious education⁷.

(3) I agree with the observation that there is a continuing need for hermeneutics in religious education even after the end of so-called hermeneutical religious education as a distinct phase or epoch. However, I am also convinced that we need a third and clearly more comprehensive answer to the question about religious education and hermeneutics. From my point of view, which I first developed in relationship to practical theology in general, I suggest that the role of hermeneutics is best understood if we take into consideration its *paradigmatic meaning*⁸. By this I mean that hermeneutics is much more than a methodology and that its very idea stands for a historically new need, which is closely connected to the advent of modernity. This need arises from the crisis of all traditional authority as a central feature of modernity and correspondingly to the task of interpreting, reconstructing, and appropriating tradition in the light of this crisis.

This understanding of hermeneutics is indebted to systematic theology and especially to theologians like Gerhard Ebeling and David Tracy who have analysed what they perceive as the deeply hermeneutic character of modern theology. For Ebeling, the close connection between modernity and hermeneutics can most easily be seen from the development of historical-critical exegesis, which clearly is a child of modernity⁹. Modernity has given all of theology a hermeneutic character. Ebeling holds that theology has actually become, and must become, "hermeneutic theology"¹⁰. According to him, modernity has led to the separation between 'identification' and 'verification', by which he means that identifying something as of Christian origin is no longer identical with verifying it. That something is Christian does not automatically mean that it is true – a view which has become quite natural even

7. See D. ZILLEBEN – S. ALKIER – R. KOERRENZ – H. SCHROETER (eds.), *Praktisch-theologische Hermeneutik. Ansätze – Anregungen – Aufgaben*, Rheinbach, CMZ, 1991.

8. For my first development of this view in relationship to practical theology in general, see F. SCHWEITZER, *Praktische Theologie und Hermeneutik. Paradigma – Wissenschaftstheorie – Methodologie*, in J.A. VAN DER VEN – H.-G. ZIEBERTZ (eds.), *Paradigmenentwicklung in der Praktischen Theologie*, Kampen, Kok, 1993, pp. 19-47.

9. See G. EBELING, *Die Bedeutung der historisch-kritischen Methode für die protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, in ID., *Wort und Glaube*, Tübingen, Mohr, ³1967, pp. 1-49.

10. See G. EBELING, *Hermeneutische Theologie*, in ID., *Wort und Glaube*, Vol. II, Tübingen, Mohr, 1969, pp. 99-120, here 105.

for theologians. In modernity, verification requires additional rational or empirical reasons¹¹. Tradition can no longer claim a special authority.

Similarly, Tracy, in discussing different 'paradigms' of theology, refers to theology's "turn to interpretation theory"¹². According to him, this turn corresponds to what he calls "mutually critical correlations between contemporary experience and Christian tradition". The need for such correlations goes back to the cultural distance toward tradition which modernity has created¹³.

It is this understanding of hermeneutics as a comprehensive task of theology to which I refer in the title of the present chapter. Hermeneutics clearly is more than a methodology. If it can be called a paradigm or a 'condition' for all of theology, hermeneutics refers to the general situation of working with a tradition, which will only be accepted or appreciated and appropriated by contemporary people if it makes sense to them.

This is also the point where the question of postmodernity must at least be mentioned. If we claim that hermeneutics is a product and symbol of the situation of modernity, does this mean that postmodernity is the end of hermeneutics? Setting aside the question whether postmodernity really exists or whether we should instead speak of late modernity or of globalisation and of global extensions of modernity, we should not consider postmodernity the end of hermeneutics. Certain claims and criticisms of modern rationalism have clearly lost much of their former impact and momentum. Yet the condition stated above remains, and it even receives additional support from postmodern influences. To say it again: religious education is working with a tradition, which will only be accepted or appreciated and appropriated by contemporary people if it makes sense to them. This is true for modern as well as for postmodern people¹⁴.

The understanding of hermeneutics in the sense of a general condition under which religious education has to do its work, also suggests an interpretation of the situation and development of religious education which is quite different from the textbook views rendered above. This interpretation will be discussed in the second section.

11. See G. EBELING, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens*, Vol. I, Tübingen, Mohr, 1979, pp. 53ff.

12. See D. TRACY, *Hermeneutische Überlegungen im neuen Paradigma*, in H. KÜNG – D. TRACY (eds.), *Theologie – wohin? Auf dem Weg zu einem neuen Paradigma*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1984, pp. 76-102, here 77.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 95; see also D. TRACY, *Blessed Rage for Order. The New Pluralism in Theology*, New York, Seabury, 1975.

14. Cf. F. SCHWEITZER, *Postmoderner Lebenszyklus und Religion. Herausforderung für Kirche und Theologie*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003.

BROADENING THE SCOPE OF HERMENEUTICS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION:
 HISTORICAL HERMENEUTICS – HERMENEUTICS OF CONTEMPORARY
 EXPERIENCES – HERMENEUTICS OF THE ACTIVE SUBJECT

The sequence of different approaches to religious education described above may appear discontinuous and possibly even whimsical and irresponsible. It looks quite different when seen through the lens of what I have called the hermeneutic condition. Rather than naively trusting the self-interpretation of religious educators since the 1960s that announced that they were breaking away from the dated tradition of hermeneutical religious education, we can try to apply a different view of what the switch to problem-oriented religious education and to an approach based on the active child implies. From my point of view it makes sense to say that all of these approaches, different as they may be, nevertheless follow a similar intention. This intention can be described as *mediating* between *history and tradition* on the one hand, and the *contemporary situation* on the other. Moreover, they can be understood as three logical steps or stages in a process of making religious education more open and sensitive to the questions and problems, which arise when today's people encounter the Christian tradition.

Hermeneutic religious education as described above had its focus on what may be called historical hermeneutics. Its focus was on the interpretation of historical sources and on the appropriation of its contents. The conflict this kind of hermeneutics is dealing with is the tension between past and present, between the claim to authority of traditional truth and the truth claims of rationalism and empiricism, etc. Historical hermeneutics does not put equal emphasis on the interpretation of the contemporary interpreter and on the hermeneutic investigation of the experiences which today's interpreters actually apply to the tradition. In my understanding, this is one of the main shortcomings of this type of hermeneutics, and, interestingly enough, it can be claimed that it contradicts one of the main insights of hermeneutics itself. The famous hermeneutic circle includes the idea that there always is an understanding before understanding – the interpreter's preunderstanding – which has to be tested against the text and progressively clarified in order for understanding to take place. In the case of religious education, this implies that at least two things have to be done, which go beyond historical hermeneutics: first, the contemporary world requires as much careful scrutiny as does the world of the ancient texts, because it is today's world which gives shape to today's preunderstandings. And second, since we are talking about education, the special views of children and adolescents must be taken into account.

In many ways, problem-oriented religious education can be said to have done exactly this – work on the dual task of making today’s world the starting point and to pay attention to what social scientific research may have to tell educators about children and youth. In this sense, problem-oriented religious education, at least in hindsight, must not be seen as breaking away from the hermeneutical model. It also makes sense to say that it actually fulfilled the requirements implied by the hermeneutical circle by taking this circle seriously not only on its historical side but also on its contemporary side, and by giving equal attention to the understanding of both the text as the object of interpretation and the interpreter’s preunderstanding. In other words, this approach went beyond historical hermeneutics by adding to it a hermeneutics of the contemporary world or of contemporary experiences. This holds true, of course, only in an ideal sense and I will have to come back to what I consider the hermeneutical shortcomings of problem-oriented religious education at a later point of this chapter.

Even if we accept, at least for the time being, my reinterpretation of problem-oriented religious education as an extension of the hermeneutic model, we have to consider another question. How does the more recent move towards an approach based on the active child fit with this picture? Can this approach also be included under the hermeneutic condition? Can it be reinterpreted in terms of yet another extension of hermeneutics? By now, readers will probably not be surprised that I do in fact want to consider this possibility, and I hope that readers will not immediately close their ears to what, upon first impression, might appear to be hermeneutic imperialism. So let me make clear from the beginning that, once more, I am not advocating hermeneutics as a method of inquiry, nor am I claiming the superiority of hermeneutical versus empirical or critical research. Rather, I am talking about the hermeneutic condition which no type of religious education or theology can escape. Why? Because the people we are working with are forcing us to realise that their ways of appropriating or not appropriating what they are taught cannot be bypassed in religious education.

It is exactly at this point that the approach based on the active child fits with the hermeneutic model and also extends this model. The focus on the active subject makes us aware of the question: *who is doing the hermeneutics?* Who is the interpreter of tradition and the contemporary world – only adults or also children? Do only professional teachers interpret tradition, or also the adolescents? Without ever being explicit about this assumption, hermeneutic religious education as well as problem-oriented religious education assumed that the adult educators were in position to

determine the meaning of a text or the meaning of contemporary issues. That things might look quite different from the perspective of children and youth did not really occur to them. If it did occur at least to some of them, this insight was not allowed to transform the model itself. In this sense, these approaches were still working with the idea of objective meaning to which the students had to be introduced. In the meantime, this assumption has been put into question from more than one perspective – from Piagetian psychology as well as from psychological and philosophical constructivism or, more recently, by the research on brain functions. Independently of what can be called the objective value of the religious tradition, such objectivist assumptions can no longer determine our understanding of teaching and learning.

My main question here is not about the implications of new theories of learning. Rather, I am interested if and how approaches based on the active subject can be related to hermeneutics. In answering this question, I want to again make reference to the hermeneutic circle. Realising that it is the students who are doing the hermeneutics actually does not exceed the hermeneutic model. Rather, at least from my point of view, what happens is that we radicalise the idea of the operative presence of a certain preunderstanding as a factor in any process of interpretation. From this point of view, what is called the meaning constructive activity of the child is nothing other than the child's preunderstanding. At the same time, realising that it is the individual child who is producing this preunderstanding, implies two radical consequences, which are quite challenging for all teacher-guided types of learning. First, it becomes almost impossible to know or to foresee this preunderstanding, for example, in planning a lesson or in arranging a sequence of learning steps. Second, when the hermeneutic circle works between object and active student, the teacher is not part of this circle and it is hard to conceive of the way in which he or she can influence what is going on within this circle. This is why system theory refers to learning as an autopoietic process, which cannot really be guided from the outside¹⁵.

Let me summarise some of my main arguments before looking into the consequences arising from this way of perceiving teaching and learning. I am suggesting that hermeneutics should be considered not as a phase or epoch but as a permanent structure of religious education, and that it makes sense to speak of the hermeneutic condition, which applies to all religious education and theology under the conditions of modernity. From this perspective it also makes sense to think of the more recent

15. Cf., from the field of general didactics, A. SCHEUNPFLUG, *Evolutionäre Didaktik. Unterricht aus system- und evolutionstheoretischer Perspektive*, Weinheim, Beltz, 2001.

developments in religious education as further – logical – steps towards facing up to this condition by opening up teaching not only for questions of historical interpretation and criticism, but also for contemporary experiences and, finally, for the constructions of the active subject who becomes the agent of hermeneutics. In order to capture this development, I suggest applying the term hermeneutics to all three steps, which I refer to as historical hermeneutics – hermeneutics of contemporary experiences – hermeneutics of the active subject.

CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON HERMENEUTICS AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Placing the recent developments of religious education in the perspective of hermeneutics is not only an academic exercise. It also entails important consequences for the praxis of religious education, which will be the main concern of the next and last section of this chapter. Before looking into these consequences, I want to take an intermediary step towards practical issues by pointing out three specific difficulties between hermeneutics and religious education, which have emerged in the past or are present in the contemporary discussion.

A first difficulty can be called the *harmonising misunderstanding of teaching and learning* and the *hermeneutic process*. All interpretation aims at understanding, and hermeneutics makes sure that this aim will actually be achieved. While this statement is obviously true, it still tends to miss half the story. Hermeneutics is not only the theory of successful interpretation and of understanding achieved. It is also, and maybe for the most part, based on research of interpretations that have gone astray and on the failure of understanding. It seems fair to say that educators have not often shown this side of the coin. They focus on understanding rather than on misunderstanding or not understanding. The breakdown of the hermeneutic process does not figure prominently in their work. While this may be due to educators' well-known proneness for focussing on what they want to achieve and on what they have to promise to parents or students, it nevertheless leads to a much too harmonious view of the complex processes between understanding and misunderstanding. Hermeneutic religious education should not be taken to mean an exclusively harmonious encounter with the Christian tradition. It should also be conceptualised as conflict and opposition.

The second difficulty makes this even clearer. Earlier, I said that viewing problem-oriented religious education as an extension of hermeneutics,

which does justice to the hermeneutic circle in its full sense, only holds true in the ideal sense. Now I want to come back to this statement and to point out some of the shortcomings of the problem-oriented approach in terms of its hermeneutics. As has been shown by several critics, this approach foresees a rather limited and predetermined role for the Biblical or Christian tradition. After analysing problems of the contemporary world, problem-oriented educators ask what the Biblical or Christian tradition can contribute to solving these problems. In other words, this approach wants to use the Bible as a tool for problem solving, and it wants to prove its meaning and value by pointing out its respective power in solving contemporary problems. It can hardly be claimed that this use of the Bible does justice to its character or to the process of historical interpretation. Again, the hermeneutic process is curtailed, this time by some type of *functionalist misrepresentation*. Is this curtailing of the hermeneutic process inherent to the problem-oriented approach? I think that is not the case. If we follow the above suggestion of conceptualising this process in terms of conflict and opposition rather than harmony, it should also be possible to realise in the field of didactics what David Tracy has called the *mutually critical* correlation of tradition and situation. In other words, we can avoid the pitfalls of the functionalist use of the Bible or of the Christian tradition by allowing for the whole spectrum of possible forms of an encounter between the two poles of the correlational process, be it in the sense that tradition holds solutions for the present or be it that tradition comes under attack from the present, etc.

The third and last difficulty is related to the hermeneutics of the active subject. This type of hermeneutics has made us aware that we can no longer overlook the active and constructive process through which students encounter what they are taught. What has received less attention so far is the difficult question what their constructions and transformations really mean when they are considered from the perspective of historical hermeneutics. If, for example, a child does not read the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15) as a narrative which concerns God's forgiving love, but the child reads it as a conflict between a father and a son who have both failed to be fair to each other and who both are in need of repentance – what happens then to the meaning of this narrative as presented by historical hermeneutics? This example is far from being purely hypothetical. It comes in fact from one of our empirical studies on religious education in Germany¹⁶. I cannot go into the fascinating details of this

16. See F. SCHWEITZER – K.E. NIPKOW – G. FAUST-SIEHL – B. KRUPKA, *Religionsunterricht und Entwicklungspsychologie. Elementarisierung in der Praxis*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1995.

question here. Yet it is easy to see that the emphasis on the active child should not make us assume that children, as Ellen Key put it in her famous book on *The Century of Childhood*, published in the year 1900, will easily understand the Bible if their reading is not disturbed by the influence of religious educators¹⁷. To put it differently, the hermeneutics of the active subject should not be allowed to swallow historical hermeneutics. Otherwise religious education would lose its profile, which can only be maintained by its continued interest in the most faithful and truthful relationship to the Christian tradition, even if this relationship cannot be honoured by either overlooking the challenges of the contemporary world nor by failing to perceive the students' hermeneutic activities.

THE HERMENEUTIC CONDITION AND THE PRAXIS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

If the understanding that religious education has to face up to the hermeneutic condition is to be more than just an academic enterprise, it must be possible to point out what the praxis of religious education can profit from this understanding. And since I am convinced that this is in fact the case, I want to conclude this chapter by pointing out some of the respects in which this understanding can be helpful for practitioners and for their work in the classroom or in the congregation.

(1) From my point of view, the first advantage, which the comprehensive perspective of a hermeneutic condition as the continuous background of different approaches in religious education has to offer is its *power of orientation*. Rather than having to deal with a more or less endless number of different approaches, which do not seem to fit any logical pattern, religious educators are thus enabled to think about their tasks in a comprehensive and logical manner. Most of all, they can understand why certain steps had or still have to be taken if religious education is to do justice to the challenges of modernity and postmodernity.

(2) Similarly, the *relationship between hermeneutics and religious education* becomes much more *transparent* when it is not considered from the perspective of a single hermeneutic theory, but as a basic condition that is addressed by different theories. Such theories – from Gadamer to Ricœur and beyond – can then be evaluated for their usefulness by matching them against the challenges mentioned above. The hermeneutic condition is the general frame of reference or horizon under

17. Cf. E. KEY, *Das Jahrhundert des Kindes*, Königstein, Athenäum, 1978, p. 135.

which different hermeneutic theories and approaches are doing their work. As such, a general horizon necessarily goes beyond any of them. To put it differently, the reference to the hermeneutic condition can play an integrating and critical role for different approaches to religious education.

(3) The work of religious education can become much more *focussed* if the hermeneutic condition is used as a general frame of reference. It is then possible to integrate the different aspects of historical hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of contemporary experiences, and the hermeneutics of the active student. In the absence of such an integrating view, the demands of these different hermeneutics just seem to point in opposite directions, which tends to turn religious education into an impossible endeavour as it is caught between contradictory demands. If the above analysis holds true, only an integrative approach, which combines, in sometimes even intentionally conflicting ways, all of these different directions will be able to operate as the guiding model for religious education today.

(4) On a more concrete level of *curriculum development* and of *lesson planning*, the threefold hermeneutics can be used for designing processes of teaching and learning. The quality of such designs will then clearly depend on the degree to which they balance the three different poles of tradition, contemporary experiences, and the child as an active centre of constructing reality.

(5) Finally, concerning *teaching and learning in the classroom* itself, the comprehensive model based on the understanding of the hermeneutic condition of religious education seems very promising. As long as the teaching and learning in religious education are based on just one of the three different hermeneutics described in this chapter, it necessarily tends to be not very satisfactory when looked at from the perspectives left out. Being faithful to the historical tradition, facing up to the contemporary world, doing justice to children and adolescents as active centres of meaning construction – there can hardly be a choice between these three tasks for religious education. Only to the degree that we come to balance them in the actual process of classroom teaching and learning can we expect to do “good” or quality religious education as it is required by today’s standards.

Let me conclude by repeating once more the basic thesis of this chapter: the relationship between hermeneutics and religious education is not a matter of choice between different approaches. It is also not a matter of specific hermeneutic theories, be it from philosophy, theology or the social sciences. Rather, this relationship refers to one of the most basic

conditions, which religious education has to face up to in modernity as well as in postmodernity, because all learning has taken on the shape of selective and transformative appropriation, be it intentionally or unintentionally. This is also why realising that religious education has to face up to the hermeneutic condition is important not only on a theoretical level, but has serious consequences for the praxis of religious education as well.

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