ALIENATION AND IDENTIFICATION: LEARNING ABOUT ONESELF AND THE OTHER

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The increased multicultural and multireligious character of our present societies has been on the agenda of researchers of religious education in Western-Europe for a few decades now. Learning in religious education classrooms is reconceived for the pluralist context. Somehow religious identity and religious difference have to be balanced. In a 1998 piece, in one of the many valuable international volumes on religious education that he edited over the years, H.-G. Heimbrock presented a significant reflection on this theme under the title 'Identifikation oder Differenz—Wie weit und wohin kommt man in den Mokassins eines Fremden?' The Indian wisdom “Never judge a man until you have walked a mile in his mocassins” is his point of departure (1998, 112). Heimbrock criticizes attempts to reconceive of religious education and its aims in the pluralistic context in too easy and shallow ways. Although it is true that “Identitätsbildung sich durch die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Fremden konstituiert” (ibid.), this is by no means ‘simply’ a matter of overcoming strangeness, or even appropriation of the other, in order to attain a positive, unproblematic and enduring harmony in living together. Heimbrock is critical of the many ‘oft naiv enthusiastischen Praxisversuche’ in this vain. He would rather emphasize the importance of respect for the other, the stranger: “Respekt vor dem nie durch Verstehen ganz begriffenen, um es gerade als das Fremde zu wahren” (ibid.). At the same time he draws attention to another often neglected aspect of the “Auseinandersetzung mit dem Fremden” that is educationally crucial: the significance of “solche Lernprozesse von Fremdwahrnehmung für die eigene Positionsfindung” (1998, 113).

Thus Heimbrock emphasizes the hermeneutical dialectic between the familiar and the strange as essential to learning, a dialectic that is paradigmatically exemplified in humanities education, as I have tried

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1 This is a revised version of ‘Factual Knowledge and Understanding: What teachers may learn from stage-actors’, in Religious Education. 86(1991), 74–82. Thanks are due to the editor and publisher of the journal.
to advocate on various occasions (cf., e.g., Meijer 1996, 1998, 2006). Religious education can gain a lot from the age-old tradition of the liberal humanities education, which pivots on ‘the cultivation of human ways of enduring differences’ (Heimbrock 1998, 129).

It is not only with regard to the students and the aims of religious education that the pluralist context poses new problems, the professional role of the teacher is a matter for reconsideration also. Again, Heimbrock’s work offers interesting ideas, indeed, the professional and personal identity of religious educators has been one of the main topics throughout his career. Already in 1982, in the volume he edited, entitled *Religionslehrer—Person und Beruf*, he expressed serious doubt as to traditional images of the professional identity of religious educators: “Bündige Leitformeln für Religionslehrer, wie ehedem diejenige vom ‘Erzieher als Christ’, haben mittlerweile weitgehend an Plausibilität eingebüsst” (1982, 8). His own contribution to the volume starts out with “Selbst-Unsicherheiten” (1982a, 160), the uncertainties of teachers of religious education about their own identity, and it concludes, interestingly, not with answers or solutions that do away with uncertainty, but rather with its radical acceptance, that comes together with the acceptance of one’s own limitations:

Der Sinn für die eigene Endlichkeit schliesslich verweist in emotionaler Hinsicht auf die Befreiung von einer ganzen Reihe von Zwängen vieler Kollegen (i.e., Religious Education teachers; W.M.): vom Zwang erst einmal und immer persönlich ‘ganz hinter der Sache’ stehen zu müssen als einem überhöhten und also lähmenden Berufsideal, dem kaum jemand heute realiter nachkommen kann (1982a, 182).

This supplies, to my opinion, a promising starting point. From here a new understanding of the proper role and attitude of the Religious Education-teacher can be explored. It is compatible with the promising educational perspective that regards teachers as members of the community of learners, that is, as learners, modeling the learning attitude and learning processes to the students, who are also members of the community of learners. This modeling of learning, e.g., in finding new questions and formulating questions in relevant ways, and in considering and reconsidering various answers as to their plausibility, might be thought of as a central aspect of their professional role as teachers. Then, indeed, certainty of faith, a firm religious commitment and religious identity cannot be considered a prerequisite for the teaching Religious Education, quite to the contrary. Rather reflexivity, a questioning and inquiring mind, self-knowledge and self-awareness,