Religion in Childhood and Adolescence: How should it be studied? A Critical Review of Problems and Challenges in Methodology and Research

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Abstract

This article discusses the question of how religion in childhood and adolescence should be studied. More exactly, the focus is on problems of methodology and research which are discussed in relationship to religion in childhood and adolescence. It does not present a handbook type of overview, however, but is focused on problems and challenges for future research. Four questions are addressed specifically: How can empirical research do justice to the special nature of religion in childhood and adolescence? What are the implications of viewing religion within non-religious interpretive frameworks? What methodological problems do we have to face concerning religion in childhood and adolescence? What interdisciplinary challenges can be identified in this context? The final section relates these questions to the main topic of the present publication by stating a number or criteria, i.e., criteria related to the concept of religion to be used in research across different approaches and disciplines.

Keywords

research – methodology – philosophy of science – interdisciplinary issues – religious education

1 Introduction: History of Childhood and Research on Religion

The empirical study of religion in childhood and adolescence has been of interest to researchers and practitioners for more than two hundred years. Apart
from theological considerations concerning the religious understanding of childhood that can be found even in medieval times, modern philosophers like John Locke (Locke, 1970, first published in 1693) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Rousseau, 1966, first published in 1762) can be considered influential fore-runners or even pioneers of the interest in the special nature of religion in childhood and adolescence (cf. Schweitzer, 1992). However, their philosophical views were not based on systematic observation or on empirical approaches and data. Yet they deserve mention in the present context in that they raise questions that are still important today. More specifically I should say that such questions were actually not raised by these philosophers themselves but that a critical reading of their work from today’s perspective can — and, from my point of view, must — raise such questions.

Rousseau was convinced that children’s religion is thoroughly different from the religion of adults (Rousseau, 1966: 332-339). Following his general interest in viewing childhood as a stage of life that adults should honor for its own sake, Rousseau also demands that the religious understandings that can be found with children should be taken seriously as different from religion in adulthood. According to him, children cannot even grasp the meaning of dogmatic concepts dear to church and theology. Therefore, they will also not be able to believe in them, whatever teachers might instruct them to believe.

In sum, Rousseau was convinced that we can only capture religion in childhood if we are willing to respect the differences between childhood and adulthood in this respect as well. For him, this even meant that it would be best to keep childhood free from all religious influence. Ultimately, Rousseau’s vision was a childhood without religion — for the sake of keeping the child unspoiled by premature influences. Obviously he was convinced that children have no religion of their own that would develop independently of religious education.

From today’s point of view, this plea against religious education in childhood leads on to another question. Rousseau’s deepest interest obviously does not refer to religion in the first place but to a fuller understanding of adulthood or of the human being realizing his — and today but not for Rousseau: her — gifts of reason and humane capacities (Rousseau does not consider girls or women capable of rational religion, Rousseau, 1966: 492). Early religious education should not be allowed to jeopardize this vision. The human person can be spoiled for good if religious influences inculcate naïve worldviews that reason will never be able to dispel.

At this point, readers might be sufficiently afraid that I might get lost in the history of religious education (which, admittedly, has been one of my special interests) instead of pursuing the task indicated by the title of this article. So