TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Abstract
The article gives an overview of selected research results of the project, “Teacher professionalism and professionalisation in religious education”. It deals with the question of how teachers in classroom interaction in religious education (RE) lessons reason about the underlying meaning of students’ expressions and what professional competencies are related to these processes. An inference-based theory of teacher professionalism helps to overcome a pressing problem in practical theology and theory of professions: as the centre of professional action the modes of inference show typologically how individual practical cases (individual religious meanings) relate to a professional repertoire (professional religious meaning). In so doing teacher professionalism in religious education is linked to other professions that also deal with non-standardised practice and those theories are put in concrete terms (Schön 2000; Oevermann 1996).

The article is subdivided into three sections. The first describes the starting point: the context of discovery. Changes in religious praxis on the macro-, meso- and micro-levels in a pluralised society present challenges for teachers of religious education. It raises the question of how teachers should handle expressions of students’ individual religiosity and correlate these with religious meaning in terms of their professional repertoire so as to make religious communication possible. From this follows the main research question: how do teachers of religious education reason about the meaning of students’ religious expressions? Second, the paper develops an empirically ‘grounded theory’, following Strauss and Corbin, as the context of justification. The theory provides a qualitative typology of modes of inference and explores their qualities and dimensions in teacher action. Third, as the context of application the theory of teacher professionalism in religious education offers a guideline for university sector teacher professionalisation, especially in regard to abductive reasoning. Following the Bologna process, the paper indicates professional modules which are already in use.

1. CONTEXT OF DISCOVERY: CHANGE OF STUDENTS’ RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Change of religious practice
Religious education in Western societies takes place in a pluralistic cultural environment. The paradigmatic term describing this phenomenon is no longer secularisation but pluralisation (Schweitzer et al. 2002). There is an academic debate about the explanatory power of the term ‘secularisation’ and about whether religious processes are declining or increasing. In this paper we use the paradigm of pluralisation, which offers a perspective on both processes: decline and new forms of religious attitudes and practices. This phenomenon can be observed on the macro-, meso- and micro-levels. On the macro-level of society religion has lost its dominant, integrating function, although
new forms of political religion (e.g. civil religion) may fulfil the earlier religious function. In spite of revitalised attempts religion has actually lost its dominant function, for it does not reach all people equally. On the meso-level of institutions, the churches have also lost their dominance over political processes. They remain important but are no longer the only institutions influencing public reasoning. On the micro-level new religious expressions and meanings are emerging as a consequence of the loss of religion’s macro-level function. Religious symbols, figures, signs, et cetera are combined with other elements, so that new forms of individual religiosity emerge. This phenomenon has been termed “syncretistic”, which explains how new forms of religion appear (cf. Ziebertz 2003; Ziebertz, Heil & Prokopf 2003).

What are the characteristics of this change in religion in pluralistic society? The change process is characterised by a dialectics of continuity and discontinuity. Continuity is evident mainly in signs and codes transmitted from the past, such as symbols, stories and feasts. The signs of the Bible have remained the same through the years. Discontinuity is evident in meaning and pragmatic consequences. This implies that old signs are combined with new ones; people nowadays have various “speech plays” (Wittgenstein), in which they use traditional religious signs with new connotations. Especially on the micro-level students nowadays transform symbols and meanings from an established religious system into their own religious codes and create – often unconsciously – new meanings, which are nevertheless linked with Christian tradition as a tacit basis of signification (cf. Assmann 2000; Hervieu-Leger 2000; Davie 2000). We call this change new religious meaning as a result of changing religious practice. It becomes a pressing problem for religious education in a pluralistic culture.

Challenge for teachers as professionals in religious education
What does this mean for religious education teachers? In their daily routine they have to cope with their students’ individual religious expressions. They have to handle new, unexpected expressions of individual religiosity in classroom interaction. Some examples derived from the data of participant observation may illustrate this challenge. One female student remarks with reference to Abraham: “One receives God’s mercy, yet nowadays so many people are kicking the bucket because they have nothing to eat. Well, somehow this doesn’t make sense” (Sandra, grade 10); asked about the meaning of Jesus nowadays one student answers, “For me Jesus is a freak” (Julian, grade 6); drawing a biblical comparison one student says, “King David was God’s mate” (Jutta, grade 6). Comments like these are common in reli-