THEOLOGICAL ANNOTATIONS TO THE ADOLESCENT’S REPRESENTATIONS OF GOD

The preceding survey on research into representations of God, expressed by adolescents between 12 and 18 years, are in some important respects remarkable and worth discussing with regard to specific theological interests, criteria and consequences. Naturally, the aim here cannot be to judge the chosen methods, to review the results of the statistical inquiries and to compare them with those of other empirical studies. The data and their analysis will be assumed like they to have been expounded. However, from the very beginning the theological part is confronted with a most crucial and dominant problem by the expectations which are presumably directed to itself from the psychologist’s point of view.

1. The putative theological task

According to the last passage in ‘Discussion and Conclusions’, theology seems to have a responsibility for the ‘development and presentation of a continuing and constructive scheme for the God representation’ (par. 3), because the psychologist undoubtedly is not able to achieve it. Beyond this specific restriction of competence the theologians should ‘say what is a better and more mature representation of God’ (par. 3). In this way they would be put in an absolute normative position, a priori appointed to decide on the representations which ought to be uttered by proper ‘standard believers’ and therefore also qualify and disqualify the adolescents who finished the uncompleted sentence ‘To me, God means …’, by giving their personal views (par. 2.4.).

Certainly such an estimation of the theological task is not quite unfounded, but highly problematic. This way the respondents with their opinions and convictions would no longer be serious participants in an exchange of different ways of religious thinking and would no longer be engaged in an investigation of noteworthy positions - but would be subjected to a preconceived rule and judged as being either correct or irregular.
On the other hand, of course, theology is dependent and has to rely on its fundamental traditions which point out and claim certain God images. Naturally, this suggests comparison and assessment. But how meaningful and relevant is such a proceeding for judging the level of religious awareness? How reliable is the measure of correspondence and difference of certain representations for the seriousness and vitality of faith? Even in the face of the probability that the preference of certain conceptions of God and the relations of the church determine each other, one could wonder whether one of the important reasons for this might be a predominantly uncommunicative church atmosphere, where doctrines are disseminated 'as if everything were clear' and a 'taken-for-granted way' is advocated that young people no longer wish to follow (Nipkow 1988a, 51).

As the suspicions in these respects at least cannot be dispelled, theology has to consider a more sensitive way of commenting than the mere imposing of fixed standards of mature conceptions. There is a need for a hermeneutically sophisticated perception and estimation of diversity.

2. The negative statements

In several passages of the study we read about 'negative' evolutions, ascriptions, factors and clusters, a 'decrease' and a 'decline' of 'positive' categories; we are told that the God representations is becoming 'poorer', and so on. From the psychologist's point of view this manner of speaking is merely descriptive. (Occasionally therefore the word 'negative' is put in inverted commas to indicate the shift in meaning). But there is a great risk that, on theological preconditions, these statements may nevertheless be taken as value judgments right from the start. This would encourage us to be rash in our conclusions, inadequate to the far more complex theological problems: that the reciprocal dependency of faith and credibility is a historically changing situation, necessarily influenced by the variability of convictions and plausibilities supported by social acceptance (cf. Berger 1979, Kaufman 1989a-c). An attitude that may be seen as reprehensible under certain conditions can be judged as responsible under others - even with respect to faith. This will be discussed in the following with reference to some aspects of the research we have at hand.

2.1. The diagnosis of 'doubts'

On the scale put forward in the psychological survey, 'doubts' are only a small step away from partial and absolute unbelief. So they are set in clusters along with the elements 'no reality' and 'negative ascriptions' (par. 2.5. Table 5, 6 and 7). Here the sceptics are just about to give up their faith. This assessment