BOOK REVIEWS

Brauchen Jugendliche Theologie?
Jugendtheologie als Herausforderung und didaktische Perspektive
Th. Schlag & F. Schweitzer. Neukirchen, 2011. [Do Young People Need Theology? Youth theology as Challenge and Didactical Perspective]

Theologisieren mit Jugendlichen. Ein Programm für Schule und Kirche

Wenn man daran noch so glauben kann, ist das gut. Grundlagen und Impulse für eine Jugendtheologie

The praxis of inviting young people to become the agents of their own moral and religious learning (in schools and youth work) has resulted worldwide in new theoretical concepts on religious education and youth ministry. One of the most recent and striking developments in this respect are the “children’s spirituality” movement in the Anglo-Saxon world and the “Kindertheologie” in the German speaking world, generating and growing apart from each other (with their own audiences and academic guilds), but in form and content deeply related to each other. Some efforts have been made to bring both worlds together, but the mutual lack of recognition remains a fact, and this partly because of the linguistic impermeability of academic worlds. On top of that, on both sides a new branch is growing, focusing on the spirituality and theology of young people. Based on the flow of new publications in this field one must admit that the interest in the German speaking world is very high. In respectively 2011, 2012 and 2013 three referential books were published in this field. This review is just a brief reminder of this important fact and an invitation to have a closer look at it, although the language barrier cannot be ignored and the richness of insights is even for a German speaking scholar overwhelming.

One of the central thoughts in all these books relates to the issue of the “theological dignity” of young people’s ideas and practices. In this respect questions are raised such as: “What is the theological value of the spiritual
and religious language of young people? What is the impact of their ‘fides qua’ on the development of the ‘fides quae’ of a religious tradition? Which directions and connections do they spontaneously develop towards the so-called ‘official’ theologies of church and academia, when they reflect theologically on life issues, related to their ‘Lebenswelt’?”

Most of the authors focus on the importance of the functionality or ‘Lebensdienlichkeit’ of theology in the lives of young people and some of them use the concept of ‘lay theology’, in opposition to the academic discipline of theology. They argue that every person is allowed to and entitled to take part in the (productive and receptive) development of theological knowledge. The issue is of course what the normative impact of this approach is and to what extent a church or academia related theological discourse can and/or should profit from this knowledge. In the French theology the tension between ‘théologie forte’ (in the academy and the church) and ‘théologie faible’ (created by lay people) reminds us of the difference used in youth theology between ‘theology for youth’ and ‘theology of youth’. The basic question is (not only for the pedagogical form but also for the theological character of youth theology) what can be thoroughly recognized as the own dignity of the theology of youth.

Further connections between practical and systematic theology can and should be urgently made here, dealing with the relationship between ‘fides qua’ and ‘fides quae’, between academic theology, church related theology and the lived theologies of contemporaries and young people, between ‘spiritual’ theology and ‘discursive’ theology. Indeed, one of the central motifs of children’s and youth theology sounds as such: the difference between children and adults, between the ‘ordinary’ theologian, the one who reflects on his/her belief, and the academic professional theologian is not substantial, but gradual. The difference between a child and an adult doing theology also is gradual and not substantial (…). Every human person has a unique destination in life and has the right and the duty to discover this gradually. Theology should therefore be a democratic enterprise. It cannot only be the privilege of religious educators, ministers, theologians or bishops.

Is this a new form of ‘folk religion’, a new effort to stay in contact with younger generations, now the official churches (and theological faculties and institutions alike) are struggling with people ‘drifting away’ (Leslie Francis) from them? Is it a new form of ‘connecting’ or ‘correlating’ (Paul Tillich and Edward Schillebeeckx) and should it therefore be provided with new foundations and impulses, with new challenges and didactical perspectives, understood as a totally new program (see the subtitles of the reviewed books)? In my idea this doesn’t need to be the case. Or, theology has always been a human enterprise. These books make us at least aware of the fact that