

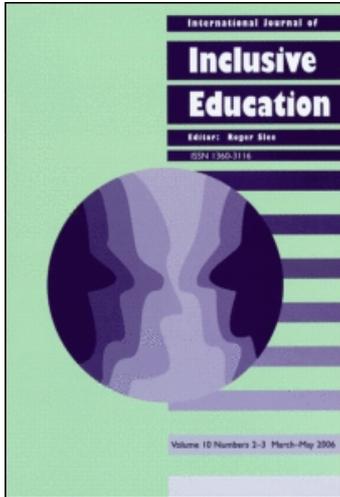
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### Living and learning in the presence of the other: defining religious education inclusively

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## **Living and learning in the presence of the other: defining religious education inclusively**

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Recent developments in praxis and theory of religious education point to the growing interest in inclusive forms of didactics. Interreligious learning invites children and young people to deal constructively with religious diversity in the classroom. In this paper, philosophical and theological arguments for inclusive religious education are presented and widened for a learning environment in which people with and without special needs learn in each other's presence. The experience of radical otherness, of difference and vulnerability of fellow learners, is the starting point to reframe religious didactics, religious pedagogy and theology. It is also the culmination point: radical inclusive religious education ends up with the experience of learning as 'receiving the gift of friendship' (Hans Reinders). This framework is helpful to plan different sorts of learning arrangements and to conceive of different sorts of learning relationships, even outside the religious education classroom.

**Keywords:** religious education; interreligious learning; vulnerability; school development; didactics; friendship

### **Introduction**

In this paper, I present a concept of religious education in which the experience of the otherness of the other is constitutive for religious learning. The dignity of the other in his uniqueness and otherness is not only an inalienable human right, but also the ground on which human beings can communicate, can live and learn together. We become learners through the encounter. We receive our identities in the encounter. The experience of otherness interrogates learners mutually about their autonomy to, their relationship with and their knowledge about each other – about what they have to offer to one another. This is a vulnerable issue. It was and always will be a vulnerable issue. How to be good to another person, how to contribute to the human flourishing of another person, is debatable and depends partly on social, cultural and personal elements in the discussion. The degree of humanity in a society, however, can be measured by the way people are basically included in the communication of the community, by the way their human dignity or otherness is respected in the given circumstances.

Honouring and fostering the other in his otherness is my main argument in this chapter, when I focus on inclusive learning processes, in which people with and without special needs live and learn together. On this argument I will build a didactics, a pedagogy and a theology of otherness. I will gradually delve deeper into this theme,

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by starting concretely in the inclusive school, by reflecting on the educational relationships in that school and by brewing a theology out of this argumentation. I will thereby focus mainly on the subject ‘religious education’ at school, which has a special flavour in this respect. I argue that for the future of education as a whole and for inclusive forms of education particularly we need more vision and perspective – both philosophical and theological. When we invite children and young people for good reasons in our schools, to deal among other things with complex and vulnerable worlds of difference that surround them, when we articulate these life-worlds during the religious education class, we need a strong vision that helps us to understand the difficult questions at stake and that offers us (parts of) helpful answers to these questions. As far as I am concerned, *sharing the human experience of vulnerability* at school is pedagogically relevant and can be didactically reinforced and organised as a *learning process of shared vulnerability*. I invite the reader in this reflection process. First, however, I will contextualise this paper by referring briefly to five elements of the international discussion on contemporary inclusive religious education that I consider of central value. Then I will continue with the presentation of the three dimensions of living and learning meaningfully in the presence of the other, in the framework of didactics, pedagogy and theology. The aim of this paper is to start a discussion on how theories and practices of inclusive religious education in particular can contribute to a better understanding of inclusive education in general (Nipkow 2005, 284–303).

## **Inclusive religious education: exploring the field**

### ***Human dignity***

Every child has a right to live and to survive: a right to water and food, to a safe living and learning environment. Every child has a right to learn to read, write and count, a right to information on the world, to social education, to introduction in culture, art and religion. The children of the human genus have the right to learn to become ‘self-responsible and self-reliant’ (singularity) (Langeveld 1967, 74–6), in the midst of concrete living communities (particularity) in which they are born and out of which they emancipate, and this in the context of a globalising world community (universality). They have the right to explore, articulate and find their own destiny in life, their narrative identity in the midst of a world in which other individuals do exactly the same. This is a human right; it belongs to the essence of the human being. Human dignity – becoming yourself – as the goal of education is grounded in this presumption of the human right of being yourself (Adam 2002).

### ***Vulnerability***

Every human being is allowed to tell his/her own story, how vulnerable this yet may be. This story is unique and belongs to the deepest secret of the person. This radical singularity is connected to the universal dimension of being human: we share our humanity on the basis of this shared experience of being unique. Every human being realises humanity in his/her own right. Connectedness and uniqueness belong together and precisely there comes vulnerability to the surface. We are related to each other, dependent on each other in our search for personal identity. People can be harmful to each other (*homo homini lupus*). People can be merciless to other people, when they are different from them and do not correspond with their idea of ‘normality’. People can also help each other grow. Vulnerability is part of being human: it is about being

accepted or not by other human beings in our uniqueness. It is ‘intrinsic to the fact that interpersonal relationships provide evidence for the reality that people are different from one another. Their otherness contributes to the emergence of the yet unknown resulting from the relationship. Vulnerability comes from the unpredictability of the goodness – or the badness – of the outcome of every encounter’ (Champagne 2010, 395). In hypermodern urbanised and pluralist societies the expectations of being ‘oneself’ are high. Young people need to create their own hypostatic and still balancing identities in a world in which being perfect is the keyword and all forms of vulnerability should be ruled out.

### ***Inclusive schools***

Including people with and without disabilities into the learning community, in the midst of challenging societies, seems to be the difficult but exciting invitation to the world of school development today. Because of the lack of space in this paper I cannot discuss the historical and contextual dimensions of and the international realisations in the field of inclusive education. However, there is an interesting transnational development to be mentioned here, from segregation to integration and inclusion of people with special needs. In the history of Christian charity in Western Europe, people with disabilities received special attention in highly differentiated care units. A lot of expertise was gathered and was shaping the professionalisation of the field. The German word for special school (*Sonderschule*) was changed to *Förderschule*, which means a school in which people are, on the basis of a clear diagnosis, challenged to grow and to put ‘one step beyond’ in their development – just as every human being could ‘normally’ expect from a ‘normal’ school (in German: the *Regelschule*)! In these special schools, however, the body of specialised knowledge grew steadily, in the exchange between theory and reflective praxis, because of the strong commitment to the children and young people involved.

The vision for the future is that education will become more and more inclusive. It is my contention that the cumulated knowledge of special schools will radically influence and even change the so-called normal schools. The professional but also spiritual dimension of special needs education will enrich the inclusive dynamics of the modern school. I believe that in the framework of school development, awareness of otherness, reflected in people with other backgrounds and abilities, will create new opportunities, both for secular and religious school boards and organisations to be meaningful to future generations. This idea was already mentioned by the German theologian Karl Ernst Nipkow in 1978 (later also Heimbrock 1985 and Leimgruber 1997). The concrete realisation of such a project however – for instance on the political agenda of the Land of North-Rhine Westphalia in Germany – will demand strong leadership!

### ***The inclusive dimension of religious education***

The triple focus on human rights, on the vulnerable uniqueness of the personal story and on inclusiveness is of central importance in contemporary religious education theory. As well in the German speaking theological approaches to religious education as in the Anglo-Saxon pedagogical approaches to religious education (for a comparative perspective, see Osmer and Schweitzer 2003), this may become evident. In religious education *universal* ultimate questions are raised, based on *shared* human experiences. These questions are addressed on a *personal* level through the critical examination and

evaluation of the *particular* religious and/or non-religious belief systems that surround young people today. In schools they learn *about* and *from* religion, in opposition to churches and faith communities in which they learn *in* religion (Ziebertz 2005). According to Michael Grimmitt (1987) religious education at school helps them to relate their ‘adolescent life-world curriculum’ to different ‘religious life-world curricula’. They learn to ‘evaluate their understanding of religion in personal terms and evaluate their understanding of self in religious terms’ (Grimmitt 1987, 213). In the confrontation of their own background with the religious life-worlds of others, they are invited to re-evaluate their own position.

This process is described by Robert Jackson (1997) as ‘edification’: ‘Through the challenge of ‘unpacking’ another worldview, one can, in a sense, become a new person’ (Jackson 1997, 130–1). Later in this paper I will argue that this interreligious learning process takes place not in a fictional world of abstract faith communities, but in the actual encounter of fellow human learners in the classroom. I will call this: ‘learning in the presence of the religious other’. This pedagogical option is underpinned by a pluralist concept of theology: various cultures in time and space are dealing with transcendence from their own particular viewpoint. This hermeneutical position can be discerned in every contemporary theological attempt to understand religious tradition in its relationship to religious learning. As a reminder, my own position is this of a theologian interested in religious learning processes, being myself critically anchored in the Catholic tradition (Roebben 2009b).

### ***Special needs and religious education***

At least three developments emerging out of the praxis of special needs education in Western Europe are shaping and reframing gradually the praxis of religious education. They reaffirm what is said about the inclusive dimension of religious education in the previous paragraph. These three developments are: the experiential dimension, the focus on the learner as agent and the need for ‘slowification’ in the learning process (Roebben 2009a, 49–51). When dealing with people with disabilities one always has to find new and creative ways of getting grip (literally) on the topic. Learning by doing is than the keyword. In this process the learner is at the centre of it: he/she gradually defines the learning opportunities and goals within his specific context. And finally this demands time and space for learning. In our hectic era children and young people need more time to reflect and to integrate what they have learned. These three dimensions are the fruits of an interesting exchange of ideas and practices between disability studies and (general) religious education. There is no essential difference between learners from both groups: they are struggling with the same life issues, they are focusing on the same questions and dealing with the same sort of answers. There is only a gradual difference which has to do with the specific dispositions of the learners at stake (Albrecht 1988). In what follows I will further elaborate on how this kind of comparative argument can be helpful both for inclusive education and for religious education.

### **Didactics of otherness: opening the classroom for a multitude of learning routes**

Let us turn to the school and its concrete didactical and pedagogical options and see how it is responding to the issue of human rights, vulnerability and inclusiveness in society. One important *caveat* however: when reading the reflections below the background question should always be whether or not the school is able to deal

adequately with issues for which even society as a whole has no solid solutions. The success of inclusive learning in the midst of diversity and fragility depends greatly on the financial support, the readiness to act and the engagement ‘in the minds’ of people in society. The vision for the future presupposes important financial and organisational decisions. On the other hand I believe that on the working floor in many schools the blueprint for this vision is already being created.

### ***Formation of the self***

Two important elements of didactics should be mentioned in this paragraph: the need for sustainable formation and the concept of elementarisation. Schools are places where the ‘formation of the moral self’ takes place (van der Ven 1998). Young people are invited to shift from a vague opinion to sustainable knowledge and to emancipate (being e-ducated means being lead out, from the Latin *e-ducere*, to lead out) from diffuse options to a clear, justifiable and sustainable position. In contemporary society this reorientation on the school as a place for the formation of the self is urgently needed: young people ask for orientation in life and for cohesion in the midst of a plurality of (religious and non-religious) life options. Education at school today is more than knowledge transfer. It is considered more and more a place for ‘identity development labour’ and ‘coping with diversity labour’.

The issue of sustainability is central for education (Mette 1994): what kind of didactical options are solid enough to bring people together and to keep people together? What connects us, how can we become truly responsive and responsible to one another? How will the uniqueness of every individual and every group be seen and valued as a contribution to the common good for all? Good, sustainable education will improve the quality of life. Or with the broad concept of ‘formation of the self’ the human person in his uniqueness and dignity receives opportunities to cope with difficult questions: ‘What shall I do with knowledge and what does knowledge with me? How is my ‘self’ being formed, at home, at school and elsewhere? In what kind of form do I want to contribute later to society? How is my knowledge related to my responsibility for that knowledge? What is the relationship between facts and norms, between knowledge and ethics? How do I deal sustainably with other individuals? How do I gather information on other positions and how do I integrate these responsibly into my life project?’ The school should be a place where such important questions can be raised and where young people get opportunities to tackle them in ‘responsible imagination’ (Sharon Daloz Parks, quoted in Hess 2003, 136–8). It is clear that many schools are hesitant to deal constructively with this perspective (Jäggle 2009, 271), which again makes us aware of the need for extra support from society.

### ***Elementarisation and internal differentiation***

In order to clarify one’s position as a learner in the midst of a variety of options one has to learn the grammar of the field. Objective content, relevant data, problem solution methods, etc. are the building blocks in the learning process. In the German religious pedagogy the concept ‘elementarisation’ (*Elementarisierung*) was developed (Schweitzer 2003). It helps the teacher in the classroom to reduce an overwhelming complexity and variety of information into clear and solid ‘elementary’ building blocks that contain the central information for the learner. The elementary *structure* and the elementary *truth claims* of what has to be learned are explicitly related to the

concrete disposition of the learner, to his/her elementary *experience* and elementary *development*. Objective content and subjective appropriation are closely linked to each other in this concept. Good learning takes place when information becomes valuable, or in other words when it is personally valued by the learner. Such moments will be all the more successful the more they are ‘a) elementarised, b) interesting, which also and especially means rooted in the concrete experience of the children, c) intuitive and immediately accessible, d) challenging and didactically designed to be open to a deeper and a wider exploration of the initial problem, and e) condensed and to the point’ (Petermann 2009, 143).

Every learner has his own learning route. The elementary information, prepared by the teacher to fit into the learning dynamic of the whole class, is caught personally by every learner in his own right. How the structure and the truth of the content fits into my pre-knowledge, into my developmental and experiential framework, depends on my actual disposition as a learner. How the content is appropriated, how the alien content becomes literally ‘*proprium*’ – which means both ‘fitting for me’ and ‘belonging to me’ – depends on my ability and readiness to learn. In this respect one can argue that the elementarisation concept almost automatically implies a didactical model of internal class differentiation. Every learner has his own truth in dealing with the topic. Every learner reconstructs the content into what fits for him. Personal experience and learning skills shape the format into which this individualised reconstruction can take place. The teacher needs to be aware of the learning profile of his/her pupils and should be ready to break down the learning process in a multi-optional learning environment. And what is even more interesting: pupils can help one another. The stronger ones can act as buddies who not only can offer personalised support, but also have to reflect themselves on how to make the information more accessible, how to be even more elementarised, more to the point and more motivating. In doing so they themselves have to reflect about ‘what is fundamental here?’ and have to become creative in dealing with the topic while presenting them to their fellow learners (Ebner 2001).

### **Pedagogy of otherness: learning in the presence of the religious other**

In my opinion it is fruitful to stay together as a classroom-in-diversity. With internal differentiation the teacher is in a position to challenge the group as a whole around one and the same topic or working question, in one and the same context and focusing on one and the same set of goals. And simultaneously he can stimulate individuals in their own personalised learning route and in their own appropriation of the presented topic. Collective and personal learning come together in this approach. Collective learning stimulates elementarisation and internal differentiation. And personalised learning adds to the common goals, when children are invited to communicate about what they have found. In this respect the organisation of religious education in the German school system – in segregated confessional religious groups with little or no contact with each other – is as far as I am concerned heavily debatable. The fact, however, is that many religious education classes become factually multi-confessional, because of the smaller groups of baptised children and the interest of other religious groups for whom there is no separate confessional course. This happens often in special schools, where people gather from many backgrounds. Interesting to see is how the German Catholic bishops recognise this situation in special school settings and approve precisely there forms of cooperative learning (Die deutschen Bischöfe 1992, 30). Radical differences and radical vulnerability are meeting each other then intensively.

### *Learning in difference*

‘What can I learn from you if we cannot be different from each other? Why would I learn at all when it does not make a difference where you come from, who you are, and what you stand for?’ Educational meeting places originate where differences in interpretation occur. ‘You are different from me, your way of acting is strange to me, but I want to know you, you intrigue me. This is where I stand, where do you stand?’ These questions can open up the learning process of religious ‘diversity’ in class (this involves multi-religious and inter-religious learning) and form it into ‘learning in difference’. Here the sole objective is not a transfer of information that enables interpretation to occur through communication. One also has to challenge the authenticity of the human being and enliven the soul. When this happens people are ushered into the unfathomable mystery of the uniqueness, immanence and transcendence of the human being as a member of humankind. In this exchange of dialogue each person is initiated into religious experiences and the mystery these experiences relate to. It is obvious that this ‘learning in difference’ is diametrically opposed to ‘learning in indifference’. Learning in indifference does not only happen when differences do not stand a chance, it also happens when diversity is wiped away. Students will then drop out of the process because there is nothing for them to learn. They are not stimulated through a diversity of perspectives and neither are their souls energised by the radical ‘otherness’ of the other.

This new type of learning can be called ‘learning through encounter’ or as the American practical theologian Mary C. Boys terms it ‘learning in the presence of the other’ (Boys 2008). Such ‘inter-spiritual’ – dialogue is not about having the last word on doctrinal or disciplinary matters, on the contrary it involves a sharing of spiritual experiences that lie beneath the different positions. I am convinced that, considering the eagerness, ease and interactivity of the spiritual search of contemporary young adults, this inter-spiritual model can be implemented and practised in classrooms. The Indian theologian, Raimon Pannikar, suggests: ‘It is about having an inner religious conversation with myself, an encounter in the depth of my own religiosity after I have met another person on the same intimate level’ (1978, 40). One might wonder if ‘inter-spiritual’ dialogue is an unachievable aim in class. Perhaps it is a challenging and worthwhile aim for the future. For if one ushers young adults into the realm of the soul, the demands of class instruction are high, the desire for information great and the longing for communication with peers limitless. Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of the process will be young adults’ underlying questions of hope and the future: ‘Is there a perspective possible that connects and unites people globally, that transcends humankind, and that at the same time helps human beings to respect and cultivate both their individuality and their difference from others?’

### *Re-defining and re-dignifying myself*

Such critical encounter with the other encourages me to look more thoroughly at myself. Inter-religious learning is not a youthful version of an adult and ripened inter-religious dialogue, but a religious learning process in which religious plurality (in class groups, but also in the individual person) is taken seriously. This critical encounter reinforces the ability to look deeper into one’s own meaning-giving system and to explore further the existential resilience it offers. Through the intercultural and inter-religious encounter I am challenged to *re-define* myself, which means to know myself better, and *re-dignify* myself, which means to respect myself more, as a human person

with dignity, who makes a difference through the encounter with others. Another person's view on a given (religious) question can only inspire me when I am myself committed to that question and begin to answer it. That is a point of departure. One has to start somewhere. Nobody can see and honour all perspectives at the same time. Without one's own spiritual view, it is even impossible for one to converse with another. It would not be worth the effort for nothing (new) would come out of it. Encounter implies difference. Without difference there can be no encounter (Roebben 2009b, 127–49).

As a conclusion of the three first parts of this paper I bring together the elements of my argument: religions and non-religious beliefs are vaguely and fragmentarily present in our contemporary societies. Every child has the right to receive clear and systematic information on this topic at school. This is being distributed through well-chosen materials but especially being represented by individuals in the classroom: classmates, religious people or spaces *represented* live or virtually in the classroom (literature, film, architecture, etc.), and last but not least by the teacher. They build a concrete access to a particular religious or non-religious tradition. Through their witness – their lived faith – they *present* their personal intentional commitment with the tradition at stake – the learned faith. Children and young people have than the chance to raise questions and to investigate how this orientates their own life project. They learn a multitude of perspectives on vital existential questions, raised by every human being. This confrontation ignites their readiness to ask questions: ‘What do these religious people have found? What did they see that I could not see yet?’ In the middle of such creative educational processes – elementarised, differentiated and still gathered around the same topic – the individual learner is challenged to explore him/herself and his/her own background again and to dignify him/herself and his/her own future again. He/she becomes more and more *present* and bears witness to his/her own positioning in a broad field of meaning. These thoughts can be visualised in Figure 1.

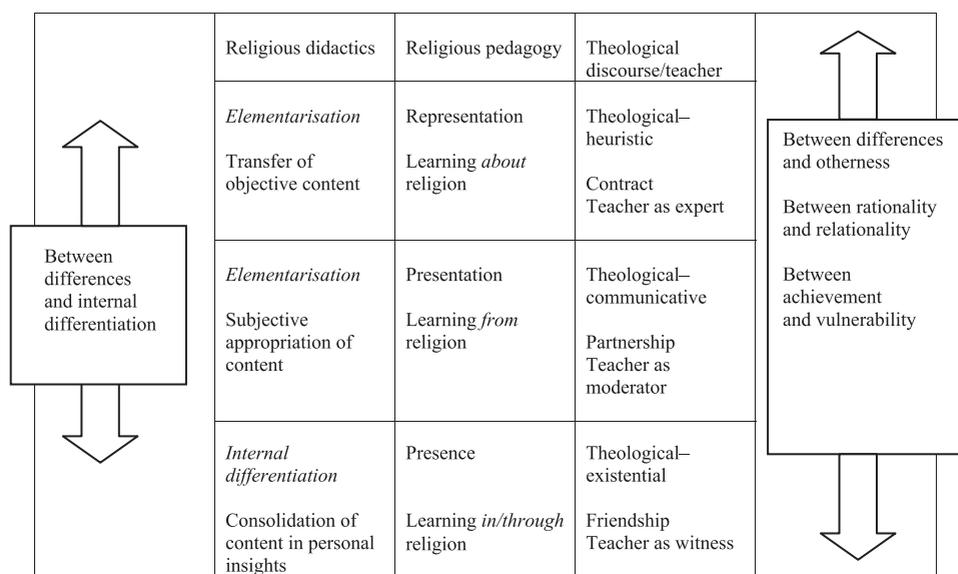


Figure 1. Framework for inclusive religious learning.

### **Theology of otherness: ‘receiving the gift of friendship’**

Which theological discourse can plausibly be brought into relationship with the didactics and pedagogy of otherness? Which theological perspective, which ‘god-talk’ helps us to understand the difficult pedagogical–didactical task of dealing with radical diversity and vulnerability? Old dogmatic truths are no longer satisfying. And most of the catchy postmodern life perspectives do not seem to ‘heal’ the complex lives of contemporaries neither. People are craving for reasonable answers on ultimate questions. They are looking for ‘holy ground’ beneath their feet. In the midst of postmodern cynicism and relativism, they are asked the question: ‘If God *would* exist, what *would* you ask him?’ In the space between imagination and responsibility this question – or better this quest – does not sound totally unreasonable for many people today.

### ***Inclusive theological anthropology***

First we should be clear about this: people can also deal with otherness without a religious framework and trusting on their own compass! Postmodern enlightened ethics does not need God and religion for itself to justify its position. The internal force of religions can rather be found in their mode of ‘dis-covering’ creative ways of looking ‘differently’ to the human person and his/her ethical and pedagogical tasks – namely in the sense of ‘image of God’ and ‘being accepted unconditionally in his/her uniqueness as a human being’, whatever his/her past or future is or will be (Berinyuu 2004). This religious identity allows him/her to develop an infinite freedom of creative action. Religions offer a substantial field of meaning, of language and symbols, in which the spiritual experience of dedication and self-transcendence is articulated.

An important potential hidden in the traditional religions, which can be helpful for a reflection on the humanisation of society and its education, is precisely the religious attention for difference and vulnerability. We need a European liberation theology, according to Ulrich Bach (2002), in which people are liberated from their overheated feelings of autonomy and become receptive for other experiences, such as vulnerability and diversity, and for the possibility of being accepted unconditionally, for healing that comes from elsewhere (from God and other people) and is not solely the product of my agency. Every human being is vulnerable and mortal, even if he/she has the luck to be ‘temporarily able-bodied’ (Reinders 2008, 174), alive and kicking. Even in this capacity he/she needs to deal with this theme, when it comes across him/her on the road of life. Of course, one can also opt for escape routes, driven by postmodern pride, by the phantasm of invulnerability, for instance by fleeing into fitness and wellness arrangements. A truthful human being, however, is prepared to pierce through the false set of certitudes and to admit his/her fallibility (i.e. vulnerability and dependence upon others) and from there on find new ways of being ready to act morally (Alexander 1995). We do not need a theology for people with a limitation. We do need a theology for limited and vulnerable people. Such a theological anthropology is truly inclusive, according to Ulrich Bach: ‘We belong together’ (quoted in Liedke 2009, 600). What we deeply share with each other is our fragmentation and diversity.

### ***Is this a human being?***

The same position can be found in the remarkable book of Dutch ethicist Hans Reinders, ‘Receiving the Gift of Friendship. Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology and Ethics’ (2008). He explores the boundaries of human existence and dignity

through the analysis of stories of people with profound and multiple disabilities. If these people are in no way ‘capable of purposive agency’ (2008, 137), live ‘in the condition of not being related to oneself’ (2008, 86) and cannot participate in the communication of public life, on what grounds should we respect them ultimately? What is the value of such an existence, if we ground the modern human condition on self-realisation and self-direction – on ‘get yourself a life’? ‘When I am convinced that the value of my life depends on what I make of it, the unaccomplished lives of people with disabilities must appear as defective to me, which is hardly a basis for being attracted to friendship with them’ (2008, 143). Or to put in a more provocative way: is this a human being at all? Being chosen as a true friend, as a fellow human being in the full sense of the word, although there is no direct signal of reciprocity, cannot be grounded on a care or a family relationship.

According to Reinders also the discourse of the right to self-representation and self-advocacy do not measure up. Reinders argues in the first four chapters of his book that as well the ‘disability movement’ who defends the equal rights and basic needs of human beings with disabilities, as the Roman-Catholic church with its plea for the holiness of life, do not deliver enough valid arguments for an intrinsic purpose or quality of life. More is needed. How can human flourishing – being fully present to oneself and other fellow human beings – occur for this person, who, at a first glance, is not able to understand this presence? ‘The recognition of rights includes people in the community of citizenship, but it does not, per se, include them in the community of the good life ... Claiming equal rights and social justice for disabled people is a way of trying to improve their share of the various goods that our society distributes among its members. Although that is in itself a commendable goal that we must continue to pursue, it does not address the most fundamental question, which is a question of belonging’ (2008, 126).

The stories of profound disability make Reinders think of a theological anthropology that is radically inclusive. So he bumps against the boundaries of modern images of a self-confident humanity that can be found in society, schools and care institutions. His reflections force him to a deconstruction of modern theologies that continue to approve these images. He is radical in his judgement: the liberation theology of the disability rights movement (Nancy Eiesland, discussed in Reinders 2008, 165–80) and the access movement (Weiss Block, discussed in Reinders 2008, 181–90) do not do enough justice to the theme of vulnerability. They are even not truly inclusive: they exclude as it were healthy people out of the circle of the people with disabilities, who have decided to form their own exclusive community of conviction. A third form of theology, the theology of community (Hauerwas, discussed in Reinders 2008, 194–206) is also deconstructed. Reinders does this with the words of Hauerwas himself: ‘I have used the mentally handicapped as material markers to show that Christian speech can and in fact does make claims about the way things are’ (as quoted in Reinders 2008, 204), namely that people are created from and, therefore, interdependent on each other. Earlier on Hauerwas admitted that the encounter with people with mental retardation formed for him ‘the crack I desperately need to give concreteness to my critique of modernity. No group exposes the pretensions of humanism that shapes the practices of modernity more thoroughly than people with mental retardation’ (Hauerwas 2000, 144). Perhaps this ‘use’ of vulnerable people as a warning sign for what could be going wrong in the whole of society is the most delicate form of instrumentalisation of the human being. At the same time it reminds us – as human beings – of the permanent possibility we have in not obeying the categorical imperative of Kant.

### *A theology of being human*

It all boils down to the fact that these theologies turn out to be instrumental: they want to convince the author's audience (and the author!) of a certain god image that needs to be congruent with the chosen image of the human person and society. Paradoxically they are not taking serious the human person with his/her fragmentation and differences. The issue is, according to Reinders who relies on the book of David Pailin 'A Gentle Touch: From a Theology of Handicap to a Theology of Human Being' (discussed in Reinders 2008, 206–24), to get challenged by those who cannot develop a theological anthropology, but who are in their existence mere *anthropos theologicos* – human beings before God and fellow human beings. They cannot justify their decisions, their behaviour, their presence. They are completely different: strange and vulnerable at the same time. There is no communication with them, no appropriation of knowledge, no formation of the self – thus no self, no human being? Their worth 'is not grounded in what they can do or give, but in what they can be given ... Worth is something that is bestowed by being loved, being wanted, being respected, and being cherished. It is not a quality that is inherent in an object or a person: it is a quality that is given to an object or a person by another' (Pailin, quoted in Reinders 2008, 218).

The intrinsic worth of this person lies theologically in his being-loved by God and ethically in his being loved by fellow human beings, who consider him/her radically being loved by God. His being dependent is a fact and a task, a gift and a commitment. This person invites us on the road of ultimate dedication and dependence and invites us to participate in the same movement. 'Being with an intellectually disabled person teaches us precisely this painful lesson. It paves the way for our friendship both with them and with God by teaching us that we can only give friendship after we have learned to receive it' (Reinders 2008, 225). Referring to the story of the merciful Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 10, 25–37), Reinders invites the reader into a perspective change. The issue is not so much: 'Who *is* my neighbour?', but rather: 'How can I *become* a neighbour to him/her?' (Jans 1997, 233–5, emphasis added). The question comes back to the person who is confronted with the fragility of the other: 'Am I prepared to receive the gift of friendship of the other, am I ready to become a neighbour and a friend to the other, and if so, what does this imply for my concrete decisions and behaviour?'

With Pailin, Reinders argues that 'The class of "neighbour" has no bounds' (Reinders 2008, 191, 221). Every person can become a neighbour and a friend to another person. It all boils down to my sensibility and response-ability as a moral person. How more vulnerable the other is in his/her otherness, how deeper I am caught in my sensibility and response-ability, to become a neighbour and a friend. Reinders refers to the *L'Arche* communities of Jean Vanier all over the world, where people with and without special needs live together, and where the central experience is precisely that no one can hide him/herself in his/her intellectual, moral and/or religious superiority. People are challenged to grow from a contract relationship, into partnership and friendship (see again Figure 1) – into neighbours who stand guard to each other's loneliness-in-being-another.

### **Conclusion**

It may be clear at this moment that further reflections on the relationship between pastoral care in the school in general and religious education specifically should be made (Hermann 2000). Also the practical implications of inclusive forms of religious

and moral education at school need further attention. Learning by doing through encounter and commitment, inclusive action through common experiences could be worthwhile here. How to explore a religious space as a blind person, accompanied by someone who is not blind? How to exchange religious practices and performances inclusively? In the German research literature on religious education, interesting connections with ‘performative’ religious education and ‘church pedagogics’ (*Kirchenraumpädagogik*) could be helpful here (Degen and Hansen 1998; Mendl 2009). Above all, new forms of inclusive research on the religious and moral dimensions of education are needed: ‘phronetic research, with its central interest in values and power’ (Allan 2008, 145), in which ‘the involvement of children and young people and their families in identifying the kinds of questions which need to be asked about inclusion and exclusion could be an important first step towards providing the kind of knowledge that will be of use’ (2008, 146).

Giving the other the space to be vulnerable, to allow him/her to receive friendship and to be unconditionally accepted in his/her otherness, in his/her being different and being vulnerable, by other people and by God, is the central finding of this paper. It should be clear that a theology, pedagogy and didactics of otherness do reveal an important dimension of human existence: that people are vulnerable in their being different to each other. There is, however, still a long way to go for society and schools to become aware of this radically ‘inclusive’ truth.

### Notes on contributor

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