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THE NEVER-ENDING QUEST FOR THE *FIDES QUA*: RECLAIMING THE THEOLOGICAL DIGNITY OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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This essay (from the French *essayer*: to try out) aims at reclaiming the theological dignity of religious education (RE) – when passing through the hands, hearts and minds of young people today. Since 9/11 RE has become a matter of public concern. Every school, congregation, faith community or worldview-related group needs to clarify its purposes and processes with regard to its work with young people.

Paradoxically however this credibility of RE ‘out there’ needs an equivalent ‘in here’ – in the faith community. Questions can no longer be avoided such as:

- Who are we to influence the children in our midst with our soteriological vision of the good life?
- How authentic are we in our communication with future generations?
- Do we ourselves believe and understand what we preach and teach?
- Do we then practice what we preach?
- What is, in other words the relationship between the *fides quae* (the content of faith) and the *fides qua* (the life of faith)?

I argue *bottom up* that these questions do matter in a society longing for peaceful social cohesion. In other words: globalization challenges our churches and faith communities to become authentic and communicative. It pushes our work with young people in RE to the fragile hermeneutic boundaries of what we truly understand and are willing to stand for. Globalization can therefore re-launch the quest for the *fides qua* within theology and can re-approve the original theological dignity of RE in this quest.

This is a never-ending story. As far as I can see (with my specific lens of a Catholic theologian teaching at a public university in Germany, preparing future RE teachers for schools) seven steps can be helpful in re-starting this journey today.

The ‘signs of the times’ are waiting to be read-in-communion . . .

1. Helping young people “to grow in shared humanity” (Roebben 2013, 201-209) could be seen as the common task of every community on earth these days. Already in 1988 the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, delivered convincing arguments for the irreplaceable contribution of churches and faith communities in this respect. In a post-secular era, in which people are “believing without belonging” (Grace Davie) and are craving for new and sustainable horizons, churches and faith communities have “semantic potential” – a universe of images, words, metaphors, stories and identification figures – that can stir up the imagination to make this world a better place. It implies however that churches and faith communities are able and prepared to make their traditions fully accessible, which means “socially concrete and philosophically intelligible”, according to Habermas (1988, 23). Therefore they need the help of future generations. Traditions are waiting to be disclosed by young people with both their old existential questions and their new answers. To paraphrase this in an African way: “Traditions are given to us as a loan by our children”. We need to re-discover them again, together with future generations, and in doing so to hand them over safely and promisingly.
2. The specific post-secular context for this ‘unfolding’ of traditions is marked by plurality and complexity. The sharing of traditions occurs on a daily basis within the proximity of other churches and faith communities. Church members, but also non-affiliated individuals, meet each other in the (virtual) market place. They influence each other in positive or negative ways. The semantic potential of traditions is spread on social media and not-so-social media. Young people pick up bits and pieces in their vulnerable openness for ‘what’s new.’ In this respect good RE should always be an “initiation into complexity”, according to the French theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet, and can only be successful to the extent that it “will abandon ferro-concrete answers and will open a path of creative liberty for young people to deal with complexity” (1995, 52-53).
3. This contemporary situation accelerates as it were the medieval thought that “the act of faith does not accumulate in what can be said (*about* faith), but in what can be experienced (*as* faith)” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2-2,1,2 ad 2). Of course, we as humans will always need formulas of the past (*fides quae*)

to understand what we actually believe today. The experience of faith however, the kenotic act of “de-centration and de-dication” (Roebben 2013, 203-204) or the *fides qua*, is beyond expression and will always need to be dis-covered in new experiences by new generations. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (# 170) declares convincingly that every believer is allowed to touch (in Latin: *tangere*) and to come closer (in Latin: *appropinquare*) to the secrets of faith. Nobody has the right to dogmatically block the road for a young person to express and to live up to a personal narrative of faith.

4. In this respect the act of faith is a never-ending story: it is always developing, proceeding, executing, in the present time, in the form of a verb, technically of a *participium praesens*. It is never done (finished), but always *being* done. Faith searching for reason (*fides quaerens intellectum*) is an ongoing act in the same way as life itself is an ongoing act. It proves itself in the unfolding. It is never clear from the beginning what will happen. Having faith is lived as a leap of faith, jumping into the water of uncertainty, hoping that the water is deep enough and not too deep at the same time. Living one’s life has the same internal quality: it is all about jumping into the deep and having faith in the ultimate meaningfulness of reality. For the medieval spiritual theologian Meister Eckhart, a Dominican fellow of Thomas Aquinas, the act of faith and the act of living coincide in the same experience of “ground without ground.” In other words, we live as accepted ultimately and unconditionally without having a clear proof for this acceptance. In the time we have, we live our lives, without restrictions (McGinn 2012). The proof of the pudding is thus in the eating. . .
5. The learning community is the place where this process of a living faith can be executed. The learning community is the place where young people are allowed to drink from the wells without being accused of polluting them when they are drinking and drawing from them. This implies that community itself is radically open to the experiences of the young – is radically a *learning* community. Or to put it in the words of Tom Beaudoin, that she is “learning to participate in handing over. Or better, learning how to rehearse through the hands what has already been given over” (Beaudoin 2008, 144).
6. Theologizing *with* children and young people (Roebben 2013, 127-141) is a solid didactic tool to enhance this on-going process of a living faith, what Tom Beaudoin terms “pragmatic rehearsal.” In

the process I discern three moments. Through *performance* (experience ‘on stage’) and *storytelling* (interpretation of this experience ‘back stage’) young people are invited to become resilient and to learn from each other’s stories. The theological *conceptualization* of the collected interpretations ‘after stage’ is providing young people with the semantic potential of traditions, offering them a grammar to enter the conversation reasonably.

7. The educator is undoubtedly the most ‘meaningful other’ in this quest. He/she will have “to select those things within the range of existing experience that have the promise and potentiality of presenting new problems which by stimulating new ways of observation and judgment will expand the area of further experience” (John Dewey, quoted in Ghiloni 2012, 156).

The ‘signs of the times’ are waiting to be read-in-communion. RE understood as the unfolding of traditions *with* young people can renew the ongoing quest for the *fides qua* in our learning communities and can revitalize the often forgotten theological dimension of RE.

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