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## **One's own personal choice of religion from the perspective of family history— a reflection.**

### **Abstract**

Religion that is reduced to ideological terms has the potential to become the opposite of what it wants to be. Ideological misuse can affect family generations and society and can create transgenerational traumas. This chapter represents a personal reflection from the author's own religious perspective and decisions in the context of his family history and with a focus on teaching.

Keywords: Ideology, ideological religion, history, transgenerational trauma, religious conversion, personal reflection.

### **1. Introduction**

The following text reflects the author's personal family history in the context of contemporary history, its influence on his character and his personal decision to convert to Islam. It also explores the idea of transgenerational trauma affecting both the victims and descendants of the perpetrators, and its impact on society and religion. The article is intentionally kept highly personal, aiming to serve as an example for reflecting on family history and identity. The author is aware that identity, from a current perspective, must always be seen as multifaceted. Therefore, it seems crucial to him to heighten awareness of this in educational settings, both among educators and in terms of their perspectives on students, fostering a reflective attitude towards individual influences regarding religion and spirituality. Of course, only a small portion of possible facts can be mentioned in an article like this and for several facts there is no

space here, so it must be a limited version about the main relevant issues. The author also wishes to emphasise that his intention is not to morally judge individuals' actions but to highlight connections that shape personalities and religions beyond theology. Additionally, he expresses gratitude for living under circumstances and conditions that allow him to engage in such reflections. People who are still alive are not mentioned by name.

## 2. The Protestants

My great-grandfather, Robert Stanfel, was born in Klagenfurt in the Austrian province of Carinthia (Kärnten) in 1856 as the only son of Anton Stanfel, the district commissioner of Spittal an der Drau and former deputy mayor of Klagenfurt. This highly esteemed man, one of the highest-ranking officials in the crown land of Carinthia and a successful politician, became acquainted with the gymnastics movement during his studies in Prague<sup>1</sup> and brought it to Carinthia. He was also a pioneer in Carinthian tourism, responsible for cadastral surveying and other initiatives.<sup>2</sup> Alongside his liberal political stance, which at that time was synonymous with German nationalism, his commitment to the gymnastics movement<sup>3</sup> also underscored his political views.<sup>4</sup>

The life of my great-grandfather was subsequently less illustrious and did not follow a clear career path like his father's. He studied agriculture and forestry in Laibach/Ljubljana<sup>5</sup> and, possibly due to not receiving an inheritance, moved to Prussia, where he worked as an estate manager near Stettin. Little is known about his time there; one known fact is that he applied for German citizenship, but his application was denied by a decree in Stettin in 1893. In 1894, he returned to Austria. He then apparently lived alternately

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1 At that time, the capital of the crown land of Bohemia in the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy.

2 Freie Stimmen, 7 December 1910, Klagenfurt.

3 Freie Stimmen, 21 April 1912, Klagenfurt.

4 On the Deutsche Turnerwesen, cf. Ueberhorst 1987.

5 At that time, the crown land Krain of the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy, 1918–1992 Yugoslavia, since 1991 the capital of Slovenia.

in Vienna and Langenzersdorf near Vienna. Whether influenced by his father in Carinthia or shaped during his time in Prussia, he now emerged as a fervent German nationalist ideologue.<sup>6</sup> Following the idea of German nationalist thinking, he converted from the Roman Catholic Church to the Protestant Church A.B. in 1901. This religious shift was part of the “Away from Rome Movement” (Los von Rom Bewegung)<sup>7</sup>, initiated by Georg von Schönerer, the founder of the German National Party. This party, aside from its idealisation of German culture, was strictly anti-Semitic—two core tenets of its ideology that were inseparably linked. According to this logic, a true German man should belong to the genuine German religion of Martin Luther or possibly to the Old Catholic Church.

The Protestant Church in Austria supported these new converts through the “Evangelical Union” (Evangelischer Bund), with my great-grandfather serving as its secretary from 1906 until this role was dissolved in 1921.<sup>8</sup> But his involvement did not end there. He was a board member in at least two associations of the Schönerer Movement, namely the “Schönerer Union” (Schönerer Bund)<sup>9</sup> and subsequently the “All-German Schönerer Association” (Alldeutscher Verein Schönerer), a merger of two Schönerer associations that defined “the Anschluss (annexation) as their highest goal.<sup>10</sup> Adolf Hitler carried out this “Anschluss” (annexation) of Austria to Germany 13 years later. In his book *Mein Kampf*, Hitler named Georg von Schönerer and his activities, which he became familiar with during his years in Vienna, as one of the main sources of inspiration for his ideology.<sup>11</sup> In 1938 my great-grand-

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6 This ideology referred to the German-speaking population of Austria-Hungary, which, as a result of the “Small German Solution” and the founding of the German Empire in 1871, lived as a minority in their state and therefore wanted to be reunited with their “brother people” in the German Empire, and for this reason also withheld their loyalty from their own state Austria-Hungary. As a result, this idea determined the Republic of Austria founded in 1918, which was actually annexed to Nazi Germany in 1938 through the so-called “Anschluss”.

7 Art. Los von Rom Bewegung.

8 Trauner/Zimmermann 2003, 226–227.

9 *Deutschösterreichische Tageszeitung*, 21 June 1923, Vienna.

10 *Deutschösterreichische Tageszeitung*, 1 May 1925.

11 On Hitler's years in Vienna and the influence of Schönerer on him, see: Hamann 1998.

father Aryanised the property of his Jewish neighbour<sup>12</sup>, Michael Just, the owner of a coffee house, which was also stolen from him.<sup>13</sup> A cupboard from this Aryanised property came to me as a legacy, which made me research and find out about this incident.<sup>14</sup> The wife of Michael Just, Sidonie Just is listed as a victim of the Holocaust<sup>15</sup>, while his faith is unknown.

My great-grandfather's son, also his only child and my grandfather, was born in Vienna in 1909. He followed in his father's footsteps in many ways, not only by bearing the same name of Robert Stanfel, but especially ideologically. He, too, was involved in the German nationalist movement, primarily in the "German School Association Southmark" (Deutscher Schulverein Südmark)<sup>16</sup>, where he served as an editor and youth leader, among other roles.

The rise of National Socialism overshadowed the old German nationalist ideology, presenting itself as a more modern and revolutionary variant. Consequently, old German nationalists were often viewed with disdain by the Nazis rather than as equal ideological allies. As a result, my grandfather, who had studied law and started a career with the Austrian Railway, was denied the Nazi membership he applied for. Ultimately, however, he was admitted in 1940 and sought recognition as an "illegal" member, claiming he had already been a member during the period from 1934 to 1938, when the National Socialist Party was banned during Austria's Austrofascist dictatorship. After the war, he worked to portray this illegal membership as false, which he succeeded in doing.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, he pursued a career with the Austrian Federal Railways (ÖBB), eventually becoming its financial director. In 1969, he was appointed as head of the Railway and Cableway Section in the Ministry of Transport,

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12 Meaning that he bought the things for much too low a price by exploiting the pressure that was on Mr. Just.

13 Verzeichnis über das Vermögen von Juden nach dem Stand vom 27. April 1938, filled in and signed by Michael Just on 14 July 1938, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv.

14 Family Archive Stanfel.

15 Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstandes n.d.

16 Erlaftal-Bote, 15 October 1933, Scheibbs.

17 Family Archive Stanfel.

making him one of the highest-ranking officials in the Republic of Austria. He was awarded the Commander's Cross of the Republic of Italy and the Golden Cross of Merit of the Republic of Austria.<sup>18</sup>

My grandfather was a member of and eventually led a German nationalist-oriented student association, a so-called "Deutsche Gilde" (German Guild), from his university days on. These student associations are relatively small compared to the duelling fraternities or the Christian Cartel Association (Cartell Verband) and focus on the ideological nurturing of German nationalism. Following this example, my father too, chaired such a student association for a period, although he later resigned from it. The future brother-in-law of my father was also a member of the same student association as my grandfather and father. He went on to become one of the founding members of the Unification Church in Austria, which was founded by the Korean Rev. Sun Myung Moon. After the Korean War, the Unification Church actively expanded and proselytised in Europe and the USA. Due to its strict anti-communist stance, a student association like the Gilde was well-suited to recruiting new members for this religious movement, a goal that was successfully achieved.<sup>19</sup> My father's sister, who married the aforementioned member of the Gilde, also converted to the Unification Church. Thus, she became the third generation of women in her family to convert to their husband's religion. Both my great-grandmother Margarete Gattringer and my grandmother Helene Jelinek (her father was son of a German-speaking mother and a Czech-speaking father, who was also a declared German nationalist) were raised as Roman Catholics but switched to their husbands' Protestant faith upon marriage. This Protestant religion had come into the family for ideological and political reasons and had shaped their approach to religion over the generations. The conversions did not end here, however: after becoming a widow, my great-grandmother converted to the church of the Seven Day Adventists. My father's other sister married a Protestant pastor, with whom she went on a mission to Borneo for a few years. Later, they divorced, and my aunt became a disciple of several Hindu teachers. Only my father, in contrast to his sisters, remained

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18 Usual awards for highly ranked officials.

19 Pokorny/Steinbeiss 1966–1969, 193.

Protestant and continues to follow it to date (2024), although he has also shown a deep interest in traditional religions and shamanism from South America and Africa, including their healing rituals. Despite being a trained lawyer and working as such, he was also active as a dowser.

### 3. The Catholics

My family on my mother's side originates from Prague and the province of Upper Austria. My great-grandmother Theresia Spatzenegger, from Aigen/Schlegel in Upper Austria, became half-orphaned early in life when her father died at a relatively young age.<sup>20</sup> Belonging to an impoverished minor noble family, the abbot of the local Catholic abbey took guardianship over my great-grandmother and her brothers because women were not permitted to be legal guardians of their children at that time. As a result, the family was very Catholic. Despite her strong religious upbringing, she had a son with her lover and later husband and my great-grandfather, Karl Blazek, an ethnic Czech k.u.k.<sup>21</sup> military musician from Prague. She gave birth to their common child out of wedlock. This granduncle of mine, also named Karl Blazek, was likely ordained into the church to atone for the circumstances of his birth and became a monk in the Order of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (Schulbrüder). They were based in Strebersdorf, Vienna, where they also ran a teacher training college. His brother, my grandfather Ernst Blazek, completed his teacher training there. The successor to this institution is today's University College of Education Vienna/Krems (KPH Wien/Krems) with its main campus in Strebersdorf, right next to the still-existing monastery of the congregation.

The strong Catholic influence on my grandfather's family prevented his planned marriage to a girl from Bad Goisern, where he had his first teaching position. This girl, to whom he was already engaged, belonged to the Protestant religion, which led my great-grandparents to exert great pressure on my grandfather to break

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20 Mühlviertler Nachrichten, 4. Juli 1891, Linz, Rohrbach in Oberösterreich.

21 Short for kaiserlich und königlich and refers to the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

off the engagement, which he eventually did. He later married my grandmother Edeltraut Werner, who belonged to the German ethnic group in what was then Czechoslovakia, formerly Bohemia, and today's Czech Republic<sup>22</sup>. She grew up and became a teacher in an environment heavily influenced by ideologies and nationalism<sup>23</sup>, following the tradition of her family, in which teachers had existed for generations. After World War Two, all her family became victim to the ethnic cleansing<sup>24</sup> that happened in Czechoslovakia in 1945, following the so-called Benes Decrees.<sup>25</sup> In this process, my great-grandfather Josef Werner was beaten by a Czech mob so hard that he died days after. All the family of my grandmother lost their home and belongings and were never allowed to return to it.

During the clerical fascist dictatorship that preceded the National Socialist period in Austria, which intended to form a Catholic theocracy<sup>26</sup>, my grandfather was politically active as a councillor for the then-unified party but, at the same time, was a strict anti-Nazi.

Johanna Spatzenegger, a niece of my great-grandmother mentioned above, from Upper Austria, whose strong Catholic upbringing also took on a strong nationalistic hue like that of my great-grandfather Robert Stanfel, married a worker from the City of Steyr in Upper Austria. He, August Eigruber, later became the Gauleiter of Oberdonau and a close personal friend of Adolf Hitler.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. My parents' "rebellion"

The marriage of my parents<sup>28</sup>, who came from families strongly influenced by ideologies embedded in their respective religions—Protestant Christianity on the one hand and Catholic Christianity

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22 Kingdom of Bohemia (Böhmen) 1198–1904, a crown land of the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy 1804–1918, Republic of Czechoslovakia 1918–1939, occupied by Nazi Germany 1938 (partly)–1945, Republic of Czechoslovakia 1945–1992, Czech Republic since 1993.

23 Eminger/Konrad/Šebek 2019, 90.

24 Münz 2002, 120 f.

25 Dvorak/Schrißl (with the co-work of Niklas Perzi), 123–231.

26 Haus der Geschichte Österreich n.d.

27 Goldberger/Sulzbacher n.d.

28 1967.

on the other—, was not welcomed by either family and was seen by them as a significant break from their familial ideologies. The resulting tensions were part of my childhood, even if they were not explicitly named as such.

As a child, I could certainly observe that there were attitudes among some family members that did not align with what I learned in school and were better left undiscussed, especially not about the affiliations with the NSDAP, the pre-ideological ideas of it, or the fact that the Gauleiter Eigruber was personally responsible for the Mauthausen concentration camp and the annihilation of “unworthy life” at Hartheim Castle, which was practically a “prototype” of mass extermination by gassing. Simultaneously, I was raised with a strong emphasis on religion and encouraged to internalise the moral values of Christianity, mainly by my mother, who herself had become a teacher due to her family tradition. The discrepancy between what I was being taught and the unspoken ideological framework, along with its contradictions, probably led me to seek something where I could live and experience my need for spirituality and faith free from these ideological undertones, which dominated my family’s dealings with religion in the generations before me.

## 5. My personal “free” choice?

In my personal perception, I consciously chose the religion of Islam based on various facts and my acquaintance with practices from the spiritual tradition of Sufism, completely free from ideology or nationalism<sup>29</sup>, and even today I still neither doubt nor regret my

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29 I have to mention with gratitude the teacher of my professional education as a music therapist but also my spiritual teacher, the late Oruç Güvenç from Turkey, who himself came from a nationalistic family but widened his horizons to include Islamic mystics and Sufism. An interesting fact is that the man who first invited Oruç Güvenç from Istanbul to Vienna for a workshop, which was the preorganisation of the music therapy training that I completed later, was, according to his mother, conceived in the flat of my great-grandparents (Stanfel). His parents met there, as his father was a subtenant in my great-grandmother’s flat after my great-grandfather had passed away. I would have never known all of these facts if it was not for this lady in 1993, when she was in a concert and read my name on the list of the musicians and remembered the name “Stanfel” and this story of hers.

decision. But in looking at the history of my family, I ask myself if it really was a completely free choice, especially as I became a teacher after so many generations of teachers before me.<sup>30</sup> Are there patterns concerning religion and ideology which have run throughout the generations of my family and influenced choices I have made subconsciously? Was my decision maybe a way to escape emotions from my family's past that were too overwhelming as well?

Later, as I realised, very similar ideologies to those I knew from my family are present even among some groups of Muslims, which could have continued the harmful traditions of ideologised religions of my family in my life as a Muslim. In my two marriages<sup>31</sup> with women from countries with predominantly Muslim populations, the first from Turkey and the second from the Muslim enclave of Sandžak in Serbia, I learned about how ideologisation was influenced by different historical circumstances in each country and its effects on many people's lives.

The fact that I have twice married women who are considered "strangers" in the society where I live may also be an antipode to what had been ideologically manifested in my family: to pretend to be in the "better" ethnic group, the German one. In my family, there is a history of one side being an ideological perpetrator and the other being a victim of ideology. Without doubt, both had an influence on many of my fundamental decisions in life, whether I realised this at that time or not. But at the same time, I was of course fully responsible for and aware of my decisions and had not felt pressure from anywhere to make them in a certain way.

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30 Also, train management, lawyers and musicians were jobs on both sides of my family, but there is not enough space in this article to deal with these connections.

31 I am actually now married for a third time, but in each case, I got divorced before remarrying.

## 6. Transgenerational Trauma<sup>32</sup>

When something happens in a person's life that exceeds their ability to consciously perceive, process and understand it, it can lead to psychological trauma, which is officially addressed as an "acute stress reaction".<sup>33</sup> Such experiences are often suppressed and not recorded in the individual's conscious memory. Instead, the memory resides in the subconscious, where it can remain dormant for a long time, but it can resurface unexpectedly at any moment as a flashback, a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>34</sup> Alternatively, the unresolved trauma may stay in the subconscious, influencing a person's decisions in ways they are unaware of, even though they believe these decisions to be well-considered and logical. When such individuals encounter situations that resemble their overwhelming experiences from the past, their reactions can appear illogical to outsiders. This is because they unconsciously link the current situation with the original traumatic event, leading to repetitive, almost automatic responses without them being aware of this.

These unprocessed psychological injuries, which arise from overwhelming situations, can also have other effects. They can manifest themselves as mental or physical illnesses, or in cases where the traumatic experiences involved violence, the former victims can become perpetrators themselves, often without recognising how their actions are connected to past events.

The theory that such traumas, if not personally processed—which is most effectively done with professional help and maybe a strong and reflective faith can also be helpful—, can be passed down to one's descendants is relatively recent. It is even possible that deep-seated traumas might alter a person's DNA, allowing these traumas to be transmitted through genetic inheritance.<sup>35</sup> Another form of transmission is through behavioural patterns related to specific issues and situations, which children adopt as role models and integrate into their own personalities. Thus, traumatic experiences can

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32 See: Salberg/Grand 2024.

33 WHO-FIC: ICD10: QE48 Acute stress reaction.

34 WHO-FIC: ICD10: 6B40 Post traumatic stress disorder.

35 Byrne 2023.

continue to influence the lives of descendants, even after the person who experienced the trauma originally has passed away.

An experience leading to unprocessed trauma can take many forms. It could be a sudden, unexpected event, or it could involve repeated or systematic violence, which can be either physical, psychological or both. Trauma can stem from individual experiences or collective events. In cases of violent acts, both the victims and perpetrators can be traumatised. While this is more intuitively understood in relation to the victims, it is less obvious when it comes to the perpetrators. However, when one considers that committing a violent act requires suppressing one's own moral and guilty conscience, the potential for trauma becomes clearer. As mentioned earlier, violence is not always physically defined; psychological violence and even the creation of aggressive, demeaning or violence-prone ideologies also constitute forms of violence. Although these forms of violence are primarily conceptual, they are present, authentic and relevant in the moment of thought.

## 7. The personal impact of the transgenerational trauma

The strong ideological stance of my ancestors has been passed down to their descendants, whether consciously or unconsciously, up to my generation. This is evident in their similar approaches to religious questions and their incorporation into political contexts, as well as in my ancestors' continuous search for something "better" than their current belief or for an ideological approach to (or against) religion by almost every member of my family since then. Through accompanying my current wife, Friderica Magdalena Wächter-Stanfel, in exploring her family history and her recovery from the illness caused by it, in which her grandfather, SS General and war criminal Otto Wächter, plays a central role<sup>36</sup>, I have seen firsthand how transgenerational trauma can deeply affect people's lives. She alleviated her heavy psychological illness by making herself conscious of her family history and by finding a spiritual

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36 The story about Friderica Magdalena's family is told in Sands, Philippe: *The Ratline* 2020, and in translated versions in several languages and editions.

home in Islam.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly enough, the same thing happened to Helga Lilli Wolff, later known as Fatima Grimm<sup>38</sup>, the daughter of General Wolff, a senior Wehrmacht and SS general, who partly worked closely with my wife's grandfather Otto Wächter.<sup>39</sup> Having been shaped by the experiences in my own family, I believe I have a certain sensitivity to ideologised religion, which of course is still alive around us and is a part of current political conflicts in many respects. The stance against religions or the ideologically driven urge to change or "reform" a religion according to external dictates must also be viewed from this perspective. I didn't know most of the facts about my great-grandfather and his ideological activities until a short while ago and had to find out most of them by myself.

The opposite of this is the story of my mother's family: The emotional traumatisation of my grandmother's family caused by the extermination was passed over to my mother and was also something I experienced in my childhood and youth through hearing these stories frequently and not being able to meet members of my family who had fled to what was to become the GDR (DDR)<sup>40</sup> behind the Iron Curtain. A personal symptom is that if I get information about a war or conflict which people have to flee from, these emotions from my youth become current again for me and I feel solidarity because I know what it means to be in a family in which such trauma was experienced, no matter the political or ideological reasons for it. So, emotionally I know, doing this is never just, never can be justified but doing it is always wrongdoing and a moral sin, not only against the actual people involved but also against the following generations.

Many people seem to be influenced by their ancestors' actions, often also without realising it. More people than one might think have unprocessed perpetrator traumas in their families. This is evi-

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37 Lindahl 2023.

38 See: Schütt, Peter 2015. After reading this biography, my wife assumed that Fatima Grimm might have suffered from the same psychological disease that she had as a consequence of the very similar Nazi history in the family. A person who had known her confirmed this to me later in a written conversation.

39 Sands 2020, 114 f.

40 German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik), the name of communistic East Germany 1949–1989.

dent from the personal letters my wife receives from individuals she didn't previously know, who, inspired by her story, feel encouraged to explore their own family histories. However, this type of trauma is not limited to Austria and Germany and extends to current conflicts in the Middle East.<sup>41</sup> In all countries with past wars or violence, political upheaval, etc., there have been perpetrators and victims whose stories remain unprocessed and are passed down through generations.

## 8. Reflection from the perspective of teachers

Educators, particularly religious educators, should be aware of the multifaceted aspects of identity. The religious identity of an individual may have more complex backgrounds than what is superficially perceived. Personal choices for or against a religion can be influenced by various factors, with one's family history possibly playing a significant role. Educators should engage in reflective processes to become aware of the reasons behind their own religious inclinations and also understand that these kinds of factors may play a crucial role in shaping their students' perceptions and self-understanding of religion. Even conversion should be seen under the possible influence of dealing with a personal trauma, though it is mostly seen from the perspective of radicalisation as far as Islam is concerned.

Transgenerationally processed traumas can manifest themselves particularly in the religious and spiritual realms. Conversely, a truly spiritual approach, free from political ideology, can be a potential pathway to addressing and coping with these traumas. Actually, in teaching students with the experience of being on the run from war, violence and inhuman conditions for life, we must be aware that they or their families may have experienced multiple traumatic situations, which may not be recognised at first but may be stuck inside these students' souls and can break out at any time. But a trauma stemming from a perpetrator history in a family is also a possibility. Such traumas, for whatever reason, can affect someone's view and expression of religion. Giving caring attention to these issues and

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41 Especially the matter of anti-Semitism among Muslims, see Stanfel n.d.

not only showing an awareness of religious and political radicalisation will become more and more important for teachers, especially teachers of religion.

The conclusions of this article are based on my personal family history, but they are not singular stories. Everywhere, people re-live stories about their ancestors, who are part of their identity, whether consciously or unconsciously. Often people don't know about these stories, or if they know, people may not be ready to talk about them for several reasons, may they be cultural, traditional or religious, and there might be a toxic silence in the society or the family in question. But especially in international exchange of teaching methods and ideas on education, focusing on these kinds of parts of a personal identity is becoming more relevant in understanding "one's own", "a foreign" and finally "a common" identity. As exchange between teachers and students is taking place and multiple lines of history and personal stories are meeting in today's academic and practical pedagogical work, at best, from several different countries, understanding personal backgrounds and being sensitive are more important than ever.

The general main issue in preventing people from feeling the need to deal with trauma seems to be to avoid the ideological adoption of religion and to be aware that spirituality and belief are at the centre of religion and its practice but not its misuse in ideological ways, whether it be in organised religions or in families and education. Otherwise, ideology can poison religion and cause traumatic events for individuals or groups, which can be passed on to several subsequent generations.

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