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Only human!

Basic Anthropological Considerations for Intercultural and Interreligious Work

1. Introductory considerations

The reflections presented here on the basic anthropological conditions of interreligious and intercultural work are guided by the conviction that the discourses in these two fields have become stuck in recent years, particularly in their education-specific form. Above all, this applies to interreligious discourse and is based not least on the fact that the premises of this discourse have not been or rather are not sufficiently reflected in the field of education. With a clear focus on these basic anthropological conditions of interreligious dialogue, the following analysis aims to provide impetus for reorientation on the matter.

   Below, considerations in these areas will be developed:

– Why does an interreligious discourse not work solely on the basis of the theologies involved?
– Basic anthropological assumptions or the question of individual identity.
– That, which remains foreign, as a resource for interreligious dialogue.
– Only human—more than a beginning.

2. Why an interreligious discourse does not work solely on the basis of the theologies involved.

In somewhat simplified terms, it can be said that the interreligious discourse in recent decades has been characterised by three aspects

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or movements. This primarily involves interreligious exchange be-
tween the three major Abrahamic religions: Islam, Judaism and
Christianity—the latter in the diversity of its specific denomina-
tional forms.

The first step in interreligious dialogue or discourse was—and
still is—an act of self-restraint that each of the three religions had
to carry out: the renunciation of total condemnation of other reli-
gions—accompanied by the renunciation of the use of violence to
enforce one's own religious ambitions against others in the cases of
Christianity and Islam.

The second step consisted of recognising the dignity of other re-
ligions, accompanied by the desire to view other religions benevo-
lently through the lens and with the means of their own theology.

The third step consisted, and still consists, of recognising the need
to move beyond the traditional boundaries between religions and
for them to enter into dialogue with each other on specific issues, ac-
companied by the admission that this requires better mutual knowl-
edge—in other words, to take a look at other religions through the
lens of their theology and traditions.

So far so good and so important. But, and this is what is meant
here by the assumption that interreligious discourse has become
stuck, what comes beyond the slowly exhausting reciprocal acquain-
tance? This is a question that should not be underestimated, espe-
cially with regard to interreligious learning. You cannot keep pupils
busy for years in religious education lessons with the task of getting
to know other religions—or their own. At some point, the question
of why and the resulting consequences must be asked and answered.
At this point, however, despite all the good will of those involved
—and this is not in short supply—it begins to become difficult if
one tries to solely argue theologically or solely searches for common
theological traces or traditions. For example, it is not uninterest-
ing from a Christian perspective that Jesus and Mary also appear
in the Qur'an or that Jewish theologians also pursue the question
of the Messiah against the background of Christian beliefs[1] or that
Christianity has largely become aware of its Jewish roots. All this is
important but not yet a dialogue. Here the efforts remain stuck in a
quasi-self-referential recognition loop.

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1 E.g. Korchide/von Stosch 2016.

Even more decisive, however, is and remains the question of truth, which is part of the enduring basic assumption of the religions mentioned. One's own believed truth is existential for each of the religions and thus, to borrow a term from Ludwig Wittgenstein, the rock on which the spade of interreligious endeavour bends.[2] In other words, if interreligious dialogue and interreligious education are not to come to a standstill at the points mentioned, then the perspectives of this project need to be broadened in two directions: on the one hand, in the direction of its common prerequisites, and on the other, in the direction of the areas in which interreligious work is to have an impact. To put it more simply: reorientation with regard to the individual and with regard to society.

3. Basic anthropological assumptions or the question of individual identity.

The only prerequisite that is indisputably common to all those involved in interreligious dialogue and interreligious learning—despite the banality of this statement—is the fact that they are human beings, a fact that seems so self-evident that it is usually simply overlooked or whose significance is not recognised. A look at the basic anthropological axioms associated with what it means to be human can open up a field in which encounters between people from different religious socialisations can initially take place unaffected by the traditions, norms, dogmas, etc. associated with them. This is by no means an attempt at simplification. The question of basic anthropological conditions also provokes decisions on which, in turn, the success or failure of interreligious encounters, dialogues and learning processes depends.

From the conglomerate of possible anthropologically relevant questions and clusters of questions, the aspect of the individual's ego identity should now be brought into focus for the context dealt with here. There is a very simple reason for this: the idea of an independent and sustainable religious identity is one of the standard objectives of religious education processes in catechetical and religious

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2 PU 217: Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2003.

education contexts. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that interreligious encounters can either strengthen or, if viewed negatively, hinder the formation of this desired identity. In other words: How much religious identity is necessary to be able to participate in interreligious dialogue? How much identity change through interreligious encounters is possible, desirable or permissible? In addition, there is also the fundamental question of whether there is such a thing as religious identity at all and how it comes about.

We are indeed entering a broad field here, as is shown by the numerous attempts to answer Immanuel Kant's question "What is man?" since he etched it into the history of Western philosophy.

To get some orientation in this field, it can be helpful to turn the wheel of history back a few tens of thousands of years. An awareness of one's own identity and the importance that people attach to this fact can already be seen in the very early evidence of human culture. This is particularly evident in cave paintings, such as those found in the caves of Altamira in Spain or Lascaux in France. Powerful and enduringly mysterious, these paintings and drawings reveal a past that is otherwise largely hidden from us. In addition to the depictions of animals and people, the cave labyrinths also repeatedly contain the imprints of hands, which are perhaps perceived more in passing because of the other works of art. But isn't it precisely these imprints that bring us closest to the people, to the artists of the time? In these handprints or hand silhouettes, people have left behind something very individual and personal. Those who leave behind their "hand" leave behind something of themselves, imprint themselves in the place they mark with their handprint. Even if the motive for this action is not obvious, it perhaps reflects the desire to express oneself, to document a piece of one's individuality. For us humans today, this is constant proof that unmistakable identity is the central factor in our self-perception and self-expression.

Therefore, all considerations that attempt to get to the bottom of this individual identity formation and its forms of expression seem highly meaningful—for the religious and theological context, above all, in order to anthropologically locate the possibility of forming a religious identity.

Without being able to open up the entire philosophical discourse on the question of identity at this point, it seems important to draw

attention to one fact in order to outline the basic anthropological conditions for interreligious discourse in a targeted manner:

Western philosophy and theology, and therefore also the political societies of the Western world, generally view identity and its development as a process that is linear. In strong analogy to the temporal course of a human life, identity development also appears to be a gradual process that should be largely completed by adulthood. Our education systems are designed to follow this pattern, and, in many respects, this has proven to be the case. Metaphorically speaking, the development of an individual human identity seems to correspond most closely to the development of a tree: thought of as a dynamic forward movement from the roots, through the trunk and into the branches—until the tree is complete and has exhausted itself in its unfolding. Such a tree can easily be thought of as standing next to its peers until, as the proverb says, you can no longer see the wood for the trees.

The necessary objection at this point is to question whether identity development is so linear. Or to put it another way: isn't such a linear understanding of identity development a conceivably poor prerequisite for interreligious educational processes, at least for those that want to go beyond the above-mentioned mutual acquaintance? Doesn't a basic anthropological axiom conceived in this way counteract the aforementioned claim of being able to gain more freedom for interreligious discourse and interreligious learning through anthropology than is possible through theologies alone?

A possible alternative proposal at this point is based on the thoughts of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his long-time working partner Felix Guattari. In their short work "Rhizome. Introduction" from 1977[3], both attempt to break with the linear conception of thought. In doing so, they also break with the linear concept of identity development. In contrast, they emphasise the networked structure of thought and thus also characterise the human mode of existence. A person's biography, and therefore every moment of their existence in the past, present and future, is not characterised solely by a linear past, present and future, but by a wealth of lateral movements, connections and ramifications that

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3 Deleuze / Guattari 1977.

make up and define the human being. Referring to flora, Deleuze and Guattari speak of a rhizome structure, with which they oppose, what they see as, the false tree structure. In their opinion, the rhizome model alone seems to correspond to the diversity of human life. The actual characteristics of human life are not purposefulness, structure and determination, but (and I quote)

networks of finite automata in which communication takes place between arbitrary neighbours and stems and channels do not exist from the outset; where all individuals are interchangeable and defined only by a momentary state, so that local operations coordinate and the general end result synchronizes independently of a central authority. [4]

Such an approach to human existence may initially be disconcerting, but it can shed light on the problem discussed here to the extent that the unfinished and blurred biographical aspects that are part of every person's identity, including religious identity, can remain. The grey areas, the ambiguities and the ongoing search movements can be preserved in their meaning and dignity through the idea of a rhizome system, which is precisely a system without systematics, and thus also everything that is present in religious (but possibly also non-religious) aspects, ideas and experiences.

In a nutshell, Deleuze and Guattari present a basic anthropological pattern that is highly adaptable to new experiences and challenges. The formation of the ego in the process of identity development is nothing more, but also nothing less, than maintaining the dynamics of the system: stability through change or, in their words, "steadfast mobility". [5]

Such an image of a human, or such an image that a human has of himself, makes fundamental openness to other things plausible—openness that can act without fear because, to return to the actual question, it can understand its own religiosity as a dynamic and not a static event. In this sense, the ideas and demands of other religions or even those of a possibly secular society as a whole can be met with a steadfast identity, the stability of which lies precisely in its incompleteness and openness to events.

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4 Deleuze/Guattari 1977, 28. Transl. Caroline Beierle.
5 Simon-Winter 2020.

For the context discussed here, this raises an exciting question: How can we use interreligious or intercultural teaching and learning in the context of school education processes to provide types of impetus in such a way that they are accessible to pupils on the basis of this anthropology? This means assuming that it is not what religion the pupils are, i.e. Muslim, Jewish, Christian, etc., that is decisive but that they are human beings.

In other words, on the basis of the anthropological considerations outlined above, the preceding considerations are to be understood as a plea for a strong biography-oriented approach to interreligious learning. Such an approach alone seems feasible in view of the diverse manifestations of the religiousness and non-religiousness in classrooms.

4. That which remains foreign, as a resource for interreligious dialogue

The explanations so far could give rise to the suspicion that the attempt to approach the phenomenon of interreligious education with an affinity for anthropology is ultimately an avoidance strategy by simply claiming that human beings are different from what has been previously thought and that this would solve the central problems. This is not the case at all. Rather, a rhizomically conceived epistemological capacity of human beings allows a fear-free encounter with all those things that cannot be identified as part of oneself at the moment of the encounter. In fact, this approach makes it easy to protect the other that is encountered in its dignity as a permanent other. Encounters with others and with the other can dynamize me in my religious humanity. They can touch me and question me. They can confuse and irritate me. They can entice me and they can repel me—but they do not force me to make a decision as the only possible reaction, and certainly not to protect my identity. Nor do I need to dissolve the other in my own religious convictions or my own theology in a pleasing or well-meaning way. In both cases, I rob this encounter of what is crucial: the movement it triggers in me.

This is therefore a point that can be spelled out anthropologically, philosophically and theologically in equal measure. Anthropologically, human life cannot be thought of without the idea of encoun-

ters; philosophically—in an inadmissible reduction—an encounter can always be understood as an one with a stranger; theologically, human encounters can always be thought of in terms of an initial encounter with God. In all cases, the encounter creates a relationship of tension that cannot be resolved. To put it somewhat bluntly, despite all the possible advantages that the encounter has for me as a human being, this advantageousness can only remain if the others / the other is preserved in their / its lasting otherness, in their / its lasting strangeness.

This idea, which Emmanuel Lévinas in particular made strong in his philosophy[6] by elevating the absolute ethical responsibility of human beings for others to the level of the only possible life and survival strategy, is one of the crucial anthropological prerequisites for interreligious discourse and interreligious learning. This deepest respect for other people and their basic religious convictions is not based on my theology—even if it seems so easy as a Christian to justify everything with the required love for thy neighbour—but is a basic axiom of my humanity. I am referred to the other in a way that leaves no way out and that precedes every religious and political motivation or negation. If a person wants to be human, they are referred to the other in an absolute way.

This may seem somewhat exaggerated at this point, but it becomes more grounded if, for example, religious education or interreligious educational processes are no longer seen solely as encounters between different religious beliefs and traditions that need to be worked with, but rather, and very fundamentally, as encounters between people. It must remain clear that this is not to be understood naively and simplistically—this is what happens and the tasks that arise from it are not easy to master, but it is important to start precisely with these tasks and only then to contextualise the religious questions, similarities and differences within them.

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6 Lévinas 1983.

5. Only human—more than a beginning

Finally, the perhaps somewhat erratic considerations addressed above should be summarised once again. Interreligious and inter-cultural learning can be understood as follows:

It is first and foremost an encounter between (us as) human be-ings, in a mixture of intrinsic and professional curiosity and that, which remains foreign. Both are necessary and appropriate.

Specific interreligious and intercultural topics and the controver-sies that arise in them are to be understood as an expression of an unfinished process of encountering, which each and every partici-pant is called upon and entitled to continue.

Interreligious and intercultural encounters can be experienced by the individual, across all language, cultural and religious differences, as dynamizing for themselves—in the depths of their own self. This is especially true when we feel challenged, misunderstood and inse-cure.

Ultimately, we can become aware that every religion, every de-nomination, every philosophy and every world view only retain their right to exist if they do not become a self-referential ideology —the proof of this is their respective image of man, their respective anthropology and ultimately their philanthropy. Improving on this claim is perhaps a decisive motive for interreligious and intercul-tural work.

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