

A spirituality of compassion as a common good in times of God's absence?

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Abstract

Since Christian values have lost their monopoly position in postmodern European societies, a diversity of world views has developed. This has led to an understanding of a common set of values becoming a challenge, including in the school sector. Religious education, in particular, has the important task of supporting pupils in dealing with the diversity mentioned above responsibly. In the face of crises, the challenge of maintaining a constructive and respectful social dialogue becomes particularly relevant. Thus, the question emerges concerning whether and how a common spirituality can be built regarding leadership in secondary education. This study investigates whether the guiding principles of compassion and comparative theology suit the challenges of the aforementioned spiritual heterogeneity. Its focus lies in the common goal of overcoming global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and warlike violence, to achieve a shared responsibility for the planet. This is exemplified through the practical implementation of the Erasmus+ project “yEUr Water – Row on it! Care for it!”, which aims to raise awareness of water preservation within schools across several European countries. It is found that the guiding principle of compassion, along with comparative theology, proves crucial in navigating spiritual heterogeneity, recognizing diverse beliefs, fostering unity, and acknowledging differences within worldviews.

Sejak nilai-nilai Kristen kehilangan posisi monopoli mereka di masyarakat Eropa era pascamodern, beragam pandangan dunia telah berkembang. Hal ini menyebabkan situasi di mana pemahaman tentang seperangkat nilai bersama menjadi tantangan, termasuk dalam bidang pendidikan. Pendidikan agama, khususnya, memiliki tugas penting untuk mendukung siswa dalam menghadapi keragaman tersebut dengan penuh bertanggung jawab. Di tengah krisis,

tantangan untuk menjaga dialog sosial yang konstruktif dan saling menghormati menjadi sangat relevan. Oleh karena itu, muncul pertanyaan tentang apa dan bagaimana spiritualitas bersama dapat dibangun terkait kepemimpinan pada pendidikan menengah. Penelitian ini mempelajari apakah prinsip pedoman “kasih sayang” dan “teologi perbandingan” relevan untuk mengatasi tantangan keragaman spiritual yang telah disebutkan. Fokusnya terletak pada tujuan bersama untuk mengatasi krisis global seperti pandemi Covid-19 dan kekerasan perang, untuk mencapai tanggung jawab bersama terhadap lingkungan, dengan diilustrasikan melalui implementasi praktis proyek Erasmus+ "yEUr Water – Row on it! Care for it!", yang bertujuan untuk meningkatkan kesadaran akan pelestarian air di sekolah-sekolah di beberapa negara Eropa. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan pentingnya prinsip ‘kasih sayang’ dan “teologi perbandingan” dalam menavigasi keragaman spiritual, mengakui keberagaman keyakinan, memupuk persatuan, dan mengakui adanya perbedaan-perbedaan di seluruh dunia.

Keywords: *Social dialogue, Global crises, Spiritual diversity, Compassion, Comparative theology, Educational leadership*

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Introduction

In postmodern European societies, God seems to be “absent” for many people. Thus, for the first time in history, it is possible and socially accepted to live without faith (Taylor 2020, 14). At the same time, a reinforcement of spirituality in many respects can be observed, sometimes in the form of a fundamentalist return emerging in certain social milieus (Riesebrodt 2011, 284–294). This also evokes a distance from the idea of a God who gives freedom to man and thereby lovingly approaches him (Domsel 2019). Given this complex situation, the question emerges concerning how a kind of common spirituality can be built up in a secular and plural society in general and especially regarding leadership in the context of secondary education.

According to religious education scholar Bert Roebben (Roebben a 2020, 50–63) and empirical scientific studies (Ernesti/Neumann/Weger/Edelhäuser 2022, 26; Klessmann 2020, 27), a shared spiritual approach can provide us with valuable tools to navigate through crises such as the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the ongoing energy crisis and armed conflicts. A collective spiritual perspective can connect people, have a meaningful impact in dealing with global challenges, and foster a sense of shared responsibility for our planet (Klessmann 2020, 27). This article aims to investigate whether comparative theology focusing on the guiding principle of compassion represents an appropriate answer or solution for the problems mentioned above: Is comparative theology suitable to meet the challenges of spiritual heterogeneity in light of sustainability and peace education? All of this will be reflected by using the practical example of the Erasmus+ project “yEUr Water – Row on it! Care for it!”, which aims to raise awareness of water preservation within schools in several European countries.

For this purpose, we will first consider the characteristics of religiosity and spirituality in the postmodern era, before comparative theology, and in this context, the guiding principle of compassion will be introduced. Subsequently, a closer look will be taken at the specific conditions of the school as a place of learning regarding leadership and school spirituality against the background of the aforementioned European school project.

Religiosity and spirituality in postmodernity

Complete breaks with religious traditions, such as, for example, in Germany (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2023) have different impacts including, but not limited to, a far-reaching turning away from institutionalized and communally experienced religiosity. Despite this, it can also reinforce spiritual search movements, wherein individuals actively seek and explore personalized spirituality outside of traditional religious institutions, with the question of God

not necessarily being in the foreground. These movements may involve pursuing spiritual experiences, self-discovery, and a search for meaning and purpose in life. Even longing for authority structures and clear rules with thoroughly fundamentalist elements resulting from feelings of meaninglessness and hopelessness in Western societies is possible (Manemann 2016, 7–15). In any case, spiritual search movements today largely reflect the contemporary individual's desire for self-determination, including regarding religiosity and spirituality (Möller / Wedding 2017, 150).

Religion today is decisively characterized by the previously described simultaneities, even if it must be considered that the catchwords mentioned above can only reflect a coarsened view of reality. A detailed description of the multitude of currently existing spiritual search movements and diverse religious groupings would exceed the scope of this study (Englert 2006, 18). However, current religious or spiritual offerings are increasingly complex and confusing. Beyond this, they are often combined. The radical pluralism manifested here and a certain syncretic character leads to a clear degree of contradictoriness.

Breaks in tradition and their after-effects

Since the 1950s, in Germany and other Western-European countries theology and the church have lost their sovereignty of interpretation regarding both religiosity and spirituality. In the course of the process of individualization or social differentiation, the Catholic Church and its institutions have had to give up their monopoly on meaning. This refers to the traditional authority and control that religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, had over defining and interpreting religious beliefs and values in society. The functional differentiation of societal spheres has played a significant role in this change. It has confined religion to its own separate sphere alongside politics, science, art, and other domains. Consequently, religion has become a “private matter” and has, to some extent, withdrawn from the public sphere (Woppowa 2018, 42).

However, others seem overwhelmed by increasing plurality and therefore long for clear rules and organizational structures. For others still, religious rituals assume significance as they seem to offer them comfort and a sense of security. Thus, it can be observed – for example – that in times when war-like conflicts have returned to Europe, rituals such as ringing bells or memorial services for the victims of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine have gained in popularity, not only on the part of people of faith.

Beyond this mode of crisis, it can be said that the willingness to join religious institutions and follow their norms is dwindling). Postmodern individuals often perceive them as overly ideological, disturbing and threatening (Woppowa 2018, 42). They have therefore lost a considerable deal of popularity for a large group of people (von Stosch 2012, 10). Interest in communities with corresponding rules and rituals is extremely low and limited in time. It is subject to a constant process of change in which various spiritual patterns of interpretation come into play (Ebner 2018, 120). Consequently, religious identity regarding the self can largely “be understood as a dynamic process, but not as the result of ideological suspension: identity here means the reflexive ability to self-identify – in the constant process of confrontation with the foreign, the other, the alternative, as well as in the constant process of critically appropriating and selectively adapting confrontation with one’s Christian-religious world of origin” (Drehse 2001, 100).

The new possibility of secularity and a lack of orientation

According to Charles Taylor (2020), secularity can be seen as a framework of still possible but no longer indisputable as well as alternative-less faith. The formation of religious-spiritual identity thus becomes more of a short-term project that can be adapted to the respective circumstances of life and exists alongside many others. However, it is obvious that such diffuseness and fast-movingness (Woppowa 2018, 43) triggered by processes of privatized handling

of religion and increasing globalization – are dual (Keupp 2012, 30). On the one hand, the contemporary individual gains freedom of choice and decision, and new possibilities for self-realization open up, while on the other hand, precisely this can lead to an unsettling lack of orientation as well as excessive demands: “Lost home, fragile relationships, uncertain life worlds lead to identity crises on the part of individuals as well as groups” (Boschki 2017, 167). In this sense, one can speak of an “[a]mbivalent liberation [of the individual] through postmodernity” (Wagerer 2012, 75–78).

Individualization and pluralization

Religious plurality is primarily expressed by extracting fragments from diverse spiritual offerings and combining them. In this way, a patchwork religiosity (Drehse 2001, 96–97) or a syncretic world of meaning(s) emerges, which is subject to the increasing influence of Asian religions without divine power, of wellness offers and holistic healing efforts, as well as secular meanings from the fields of art, culture, and politics. In a post-migrant society in which the question of majorities or minorities can already be considered to be at least partially outdated, being born into a certain life context is, therefore, less decisive than the fact that the individual is faced with the task of making various choices in life, particularly regarding the area of religion and spirituality (Knippenberg 2002, 20; Berger 1992). However, today it is no longer only a question of belonging to a religion, but rather how this personal religiosity is lived out (Charim 2018, 213–214).

In principle, one can speak of a development from “trust in God to trust in oneself” (Wodtke-Werner 2016, 10) because the “appropriation and transformation of religion has undergone a characteristic change of perspective and paradigm under the conditions of social individualization” (Drehse 2001, 96). It is not conformity with the prescriptions of the decisive church system, but rather compatibility with the experiences of the religious subject: “In the

foreground is [...] the specific development history of the individual, into which religious ideas and orientations must fit. Thus, the direction of vision has turned: The focus is now no longer on the formation of the individual by a religion, but on the integration of religious traditions into the individual's search for life and meaning. That this individual finds his or her way is decisive" (Englert 2006, 284).

New vulnerability and longing for wholeness

However, the individual is now obliged to find his or her way in this profit- and mood-oriented "market of possibilities", which can be quite overwhelming because when past certainties crumble, they can be replaced by sensations of unpredictability and the obligation to be flexible (Bauman 2007, Epping 2019, 364): "We live in an age of uncertainties, insecurities, and fragments" (Habringer-Hagleitner 2018, 35; Berry 2015, 194). Global crises such as political unrest, environmental degradation, pandemics, and wars further shake the lives of contemporary people, making them particularly aware of their vulnerability. Thus, young people in particular – full of concern and often admonishing – ask questions about the future of the world.

What is certain is that the individual is now forced to relinquish the old and the familiar, find his way into a new "normality" and have to exist in it (Roebben a 2020, 71–77). A new "not knowing" with a view to the near and distant future – at best a "maybe" in the sign of the unforeseeable – plays a significant role here (Roebben a 2020, 28). Existence in the mode of waiting and having to approach a reality that has become threatening is part of everyday life, particularly for young people.

Contradictoriness and simultaneities as leading categories

Living with various uncertainties and a heightened awareness of the ambivalence of existence (Roebben a 2020, 79) prompts the individual to

increasingly look for that which supports, comforts, and gives (supposed) security. At the very least, a multifaceted contradictoriness manifests itself when – for example – areligious rationality in the sense of a sober view of the world oriented purely to empiricism goes hand in hand with irrational religiosity that foregoes agreement between different (faith) statements (Englert 2006, 23). Thus, while a certain tension can be felt between secularization tendencies and a resurgence of the spiritual, at the same time it is precisely this complex interplay of pluralization and secularization that leads to something new (Grümme 2017, 12): “The interesting thing is precisely that both have found their way to each other: a (diffuse) religiosity without rational justification claims and a rationality without (concrete) religious consciousness content” (Englert 2006, 23). While the number of spiritual “seekers” is growing, the spiritually “apathetic” as well as fundamentalists are also increasing at the same time (Halik 2020, 4).

Comparative theology and its significance for the context of schools

Due to its dialogical and empathic approach, comparative theology will be presented here as a way of adequately encountering spiritual-religious heterogeneity. The (new) comparative theology is a comparative approach to God (von Stosch 2020, 156) that hopes to gain new insights for its theology from interreligious dialogue and the cross-religious study of sources from different religious traditions (von Stosch 2020, 134–148). Starting from an internal perspective and bound to a specific denomination, it proceeds contextually and micrologically. It aims to contribute to an appreciative approach to foreign religious traditions as well as a deeper understanding of the claims to the validity of one’s religion (von Stosch 2017, 318). In doing so, it can also include philosophical and areligious considerations in a cross-disciplinary reflection process. This holds particular importance given the situation of spiritual simultaneities and identity diffusion described before.

Comparative theology is about normative questions about ultimate reality, the question of truth, and thinking about how God can be spoken of appropriately based on a diversity of human answers (von Stosch 2017, 323–324). It aims to distance itself from general judgments and instead develop a special sensitivity for the heterogeneity of religious traditions and a sense of the complexity of spirituality. In a hermeneutic manner, comparative theology aims to establish an awareness of its normative foundations of the conversation and cultivate a willingness to critically question them (von Stosch 2017, 320–321).

Regarding the current state of the discussion on the interaction between religious education and comparative theology, it can be said that a systematic examination and relevant scholarly reflection on the possibilities of integrating comparative theology into religious education are still pending (Roebben / von Stosch 2022). However, initial practical attempts to apply this form of interreligious learning in religious educational practice exist, even though they have not been sufficiently empirically researched to demonstrate their effectiveness. In Germany, initial considerations on the collaboration between comparative theology and religious education were published in a book on primary and secondary school education in 2014 and 2015, as well as in several separate articles (Sass 2014, 94–103). In the United States, a collection of essays on this complex topic was published in 2016 (Brecht / Lockling). Reflections on the implementation of comparative theology in the context of religious education, particularly in terms of contemporary teacher training, were addressed in a recently published habilitation thesis in Germany. The challenges of transferring comparative theology into the school setting and religious instruction were discussed, and potential solutions were suggested (Domsel 2023).

The paradigm of compassion

The term “compassion” can best be translated as “sympathy” and was primarily coined by the fundamental theologian Johann-Baptist Metz. In the context of practising mercy and compassion for others, the latter also aims to remind us that Jesus’ gaze above all was not on sin but primarily on the suffering of people, especially those who were hardly noticed or socially disadvantaged. His special sensitivity for vulnerable fellow (human) beings finds its anchorage in the Christian perspective, according to which God reveals Himself especially where there is a letting go of other people’s suffering and compassion for others is actively lived. In this context, it is worth noting that the paradigm of compassion not only appeals to Christians: as a pre-theological and non-ideological quantity, an empathic and compassionate spirituality is directional for the future and well-being of human beings because it can unite people of faith and spirituality as well as areligious people. It draws from Christian faith, other faith-based traditions, and humanistic motivations. According to Metz, compassion sends us “to the front lines of political, social, and cultural conflicts in the world today. To perceive and give voice to foreign suffering is the unconditional condition of all future peace policies and new forms of social solidarity” (Metz 2000, 13–14). This is about breaking down prejudices and false images of the other, as well as the task of enlightenment and knowledge transfer.

The explanations on the paradigm of compassion have shown that due to its dialogue-promoting and pacifying character, it can (also) be located in the sphere of comparative theology and helps to make it fruitful for religious pedagogical practice and leadership in schools (Domsel 2023; Baert-Knoll / Domsel 2021).

School as a mirror of society

Life in Europe is becoming increasingly diverse. Different cultures, religions, people with and without disabilities, gender diversity, and diverse lifeworld (Roebben b 2020, 372) are all areas that are also reflected in educational institutions in Germany and thus influence the school system as a whole. Buzzwords such as migration, inclusion, and gender as well as multiple cultures and spiritualities not only play a role in society as a whole but are also reflected in schools. It is not without reason that schools are seen as a mirror of society, under the special condition that they carry a specific orientation and responsibility with a view to the future due to their focus on young people.

The special role of religious education

Teachers will have to deal with even more diverse student communities in the future because the growing diversity of society is increasingly being reflected in schools. For example, there will be significantly more students with a migrant background, and social differences will increase. The inclusion of students with special needs calls for new concepts and is linked not least to debates about values education. In the face of a wealth of different views, the search for a possible common ground that can serve as a basis for understanding and strengthening communality becomes particularly urgent (Roebben b 2020, 373). This also involves practicing tolerance and empathy towards the foreign and – currently in particular – the question of how specific challenges and threats of crises can be overcome together.

Developments such as the emergence of questions of meaning coupled with increasing spiritual-religious diversity especially affect religious education (Roebben b 2020, 373). The war in Europe and the Coronavirus crisis are the most important current challenges to religious education because they raise questions about the future and ways of dealing with fear and uncertainty. The current needs of young people, their spiritual questions, and what (currently)

moves them can and should be addressed in religious education. It is precisely here that there is sufficient space to address questions of life and deal with the situation of a global threat (Wissner 2020, 125).

A special opportunity of religious education lies in its possibility to broaden perspectives because it considers the human being as holistic and thus can also take into account or sufficiently appreciate its spiritual dimension. Finally, religious education also represents a protective space, a safe space in which it is possible to exchange experiences with others and situate them in the context of religiosity or spirituality. Accordingly, the sphere of school and teaching is exempt because it is largely removed from the constraints of social reproduction and thus represents a place where critical-constructive interaction with can be practised and autonomy can be initiated (Grümme 2017, 102).

The Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Gymnasium

Regarding school as the place of learning, the question emerges whether a common school spirituality is at all possible given an extreme plurality and – if so – how it can be established. These considerations shall now be specified based on the concrete example of the Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Gymnasium in Bonn. For this purpose, it is necessary to first briefly introduce the school and outline the conditions under which religious instruction occurs.

The Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Gymnasium (EMA) was founded in 1882 under the name “Höhere Bürgerschule” and renamed in 1938 based on the suggestion of the Protestant Church of Bonn after the publicist, historian and poet Ernst-Moritz-Arndt. The EMA currently has about 900 students and 80 teachers. The main focus of the school’s profile is on mathematics and the natural sciences.

In terms of content and didactic focus, it can be seen that interdisciplinary projects are widely accepted. They are primarily linked to the natural sciences and are very popular and well-established among students, teachers, and parents. Social projects or those that advocate environmental

protection enjoy similar popularity. While projects with religious connotations tend to be met with skepticism and rejection, especially on the part of the teaching staff, a much broader spectrum of opinions can be found among the students, which reflects the religious-spiritual plurality described before.

The Europe-wide school project “yEUr Water – Row on it! Care for it!”

The increasing environmental destruction by humans, the coronavirus pandemic, political unrest, etc., have led to a more drastic perception of vulnerability. In this context, above all, young people are drawing attention to our responsibility for the planet in an almost prophetic manner. The Europe-wide school project “yEUr Water – Row on it! Care for it!” would like to tie in with these efforts and sensitize or call for the necessity of protecting a vital resource. The planned duration of the project is three years (2020–2023). Six different schools from Germany, France, Spain, and Italy are working on the large-scale project in the context of Erasmus+ on the topic of “Water and Sustainability in the EU”. The students will work together in Bonn (D), Mannheim (D), Dunkerque (F), Rota (ES), and Bosa (I) and organize joint activities with a focus on water sports (rowing), whereby the exchanges usually last five to seven days. Regarding the participation possibilities, in principle, there is strong openness as everyone is welcome and can participate with or without digital skills, travel, and foreign language skills.

Specifically planned is an empirical study on the topic of “water” in the form of a query of prior knowledge and intellectual resources. In addition, local conditions – such as the existing rowing club at the EMA – must be included in the planning and implementation. The respective regions of the participating countries are partly characterized by water tourism, the social, economic, and ecological effects of which will be investigated. Furthermore, it will be a matter of perceiving water bodies as local recreation areas, clarifying questions regarding water consumption, and examining the effects of pollution and

human intervention on natural water dynamics. In this context, the ecological consequences of interruptions and straightening of the watercourse – e.g. of the Rhine – will be exemplarily addressed. The primary goal is the acquisition of knowledge regarding sustainable water management and global supply as well as the possibilities of energy production from water.

The participation ideas of individual subjects

The various participation ideas of individual subjects are in demand: for example, artistic approaches to the topic of water are to be created, which work – among other things – with pictorial-creative perspectives. In chemistry, the focus will be placed on the quality of drinking water, while in geography, dangers associated with water such as erosion, floods, and droughts will be highlighted and their consequences investigated. In biology, the question could be explored concerning the extent to which the ongoing destruction of the environment and the lack of biodiversity caused by it favor the spread of (new) viruses that also affect humans.

Topics and thematic preparation in religious education

The symbolic meaning of water is to be addressed regarding different religions, such as Judaism and Islam, but primarily Christianity. From a Christian perspective, the focus will be placed on the topic of “creation care” and the possible interpretations of the Old Testament biblical passage Gen 1,28: ”subdue the earth” will be explored and a differentiated understanding of this will be worked out. In this way, the school project “yEUr Water – Row on it! Care for it!” can be used to show how religion in particular can sensitize students to the vulnerability of the planet and our responsibility for it, which also provides the opportunity to recognize the added value of Christianity in the sense of an option.

The climate crisis, as well as the pandemic, are facts. A fact cannot be denied and be changed through belief. Religion does not aim to do so either. Religion is about interpretation. In the face of the impending factual uninhabitability of the Earth, even as a faithful person, one could doubt the belief in God's good creation. However, one is also allowed to hold onto it, as long as this belief is not misunderstood as asserting alternative facts, but rather as what faith is: providing and interpreting meaning. For example, theologian Andreas Benk states that the Christian creation narratives describe a utopia of how the world should be according to God's will, but never was (Benk 2016). This vision of a perfect world as God intended has consequences. It can motivate people to take action. Thus, religion can be a strong motivator, not only for engaging in climate policy but also for peace. However, it does not replace other approaches. In the project, work was done towards this distinction by incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives on the world and humanity and highlighting the specificity of religious perspectives on meaning.

Broader topics of spirituality and shared moral values explore the interplay between individual freedom and communal bonds and the embodiment of mercy, compassion, and solidarity in interactions with others. The interdisciplinary initiative aims to sensitize students as much as possible to the suffering of others and call for responsibility in solidarity with the weak and disadvantaged in our society. An essential part of this is the plan to work out the connecting elements between Catholic and Protestant religious education and the other subjects. In addition, it can be seen that spirituality is also to be found in other school subjects: for example, the bodily dimension finds special consideration in physical education, and the performative-aesthetic aspect in art classes. In general, students can experience that there is something worth protecting and that corresponding measures can only be successful if "everyone pulls together" and has an "overriding" goal in mind.

The thematic groundwork for the project has already been undertaken as a digital series of lessons for religious education on the topic of “Christian perspectives of hope in times of the Corona pandemic”. Related topics of “Freedom and Solidarity” and “Ideas of Justice in the Context of Triage” were addressed here. Already during the first lockdown in spring 2020, it became apparent that religious education was particularly important for the students as a kind of “mental support.” Accordingly, one student, Marco, aged 16, shared, “During the challenging period of the first lockdown, religious education opened my eyes to a new perspective. Although I’m not sure if I can believe everything, it’s an intriguing thought experiment.”

In this special and challenging time, existential questions or questions about life arose for many children and young people, as well as feelings of fear and threat. These could be addressed in religious education classes, taken seriously, and located in terms of religious education with a view to Christian perspectives of hope. This could be accomplished, for instance, by exploring the Christian message of the Kingdom of God. The concept of ‘already and not yet’ states that elements of God’s reign can be experienced in the present reality, while its complete fulfillment will occur in the future. It emphasizes the tension between the presence of divine rule in the world and the hope for its ultimate fulfillment in the eschatological future. For youth and the COVID-19 situation, the concept of the Kingdom of God can offer hope and remind them to find elements of love, forgiveness, compassion, and solidarity in the present reality, while trusting in a better future. In this way, strategies were sought together to better cope with the crisis.

The contribution of religious education to leadership in schools

The project “yEUr Water – Row on it! Care for it!” also offers an opportunity to include the subject of religion with its relevance for life, education, and society and emphasize its importance for the identity development of pupils.

However, due to the “critical eye” or reservations against the subject of religion, interdisciplinary cooperation can certainly pose a challenge. Thus, it is necessary first to do a certain amount of “preparatory work” to show that the goal is common progress in learning and knowledge and that religious education can make an essential contribution in terms of content as well as in social terms through its commitment to a willingness to engage in dialogue and understanding. Accordingly, it is also a matter of sensitizing students to the “value” of religious-spiritual approaches as well as being able to take seriously and understand other or foreign perspectives on the world and man. In this context, it is important to recall the statement of the student, Marco, who appears to have successfully achieved this objective. For example, it would be a great step forward if a person with an atheistic attitude – whether a teacher or a student – could understand the reasons why a relationship to transcendence or God is important to some people and could strengthen it mentally, especially in times of crisis. After all, the transnational project is not least about promoting tolerance and understanding the foreign and (still) unknown for the other.

In all of this, the criterion of transparency gains particular importance: it is essential for everyone within the school community to credibly demonstrate that the contribution of the Catholic and Protestant Religion departments is in no way intended to proselytize, but rather religiousness should be presented as an offer and a possibility for interpreting the world. In terms of content, it is important to work out that there are also various “preliminary stages” of religiosity – such as the ability to self-transcendence – which can lead people away from a sole focusing on their own person and enable them to turn to a human, but also divine You. The aim is to broaden the perspective, understand, and – if possible – empathize with what spirituality and religiosity mean and why they are justified. It should be taken seriously as a system for interpreting the world that can also help overcome crises and strengthen the community.

Conclusion

The above-outlined pan-European project offers major learning opportunities in different areas and shows impressively how important the sustainable use of the vital resource water is and especially has future generations in mind. It not only addresses the cognitive but pursues a holistic perspective because it also addresses – for example – the physicality of human beings in the concrete form of sporting activity. In addition to this end in itself, it can undoubtedly contribute to strengthening the sense of community and can thus not least provide the breeding ground for the formation of a common school spirituality, which is particularly important given global crises and can represent an important basis for overcoming them.

In this way, the project demonstrates that boundaries – such as those of an organizational nature or language – can be broken down in favor of an understanding dialogue. It shows common goals like sustainability that are worth working for, strengthens interdisciplinary initiatives, and – in the context of globalization – aims to establish greater connections between the actions of individuals and their effects on the entire ecosystem. In this sense, the guiding principle of compassion has also come into play in the course of the project, when a common effort for a higher goal is pursued with (com)passion and relevant expertise is acquired. Regarding the project, the latter includes the essential perception that how we deal with the environment in general and the vital water resources, in particular, can also directly impact people in distant countries. Furthermore, it emerges that due to its pre-theological and non-ideological character, the guiding principle of compassion is particularly important for forming a common spirituality in the school context and could do justice to a contemporary heterogeneity of religiosity to a special degree. Regarding the project, students and teachers who are – for example – atheistic can be involved.

All of this is in line with the impetus of comparative theology, which aims to promote dialogue between religions and include different worldviews in its process of cognition. In this sense, comparative theology may well denote a signpost that helps acknowledge religious plurality and unite people in recognition of their differences in their worldviews.

Regarding the project – which takes place at a “well-to-do bourgeois” high school in Bonn – it must be said that the socially relevant problem of increasing religious fundamentalism is only exceptionally present at this institution. Given other places and the presence of the problem there, an essential desideratum is to develop suitable concepts against the background of comparative theology and peace education, which are characterized by scientific expertise and at the same time decidedly practice-oriented.

The contributions from the side of religious education are important because, in addition to the consideration of global contexts, these also represent an opportunity to open the perspective in the direction of transcendence so that all participants can also be perceived and appreciated in their spiritual dimension. Learning progress thus extends far beyond the purely cognitive. In this way, religious education contributes significantly to the establishment of a school spirituality. However, especially in the context of project work, it should be emphasized that this cannot be reduced only to theological ethics and social projects. It is necessary to be aware of the proprium of religious education, its required competencies, and its thematically broad curriculum, and communicate this to the outside world accordingly.

In this way, the danger of moralization can be countered. However, it should be taken into account that it cannot and must not be the goal of religious education to be “at home” in a certain religion as a central educational goal. At least on the Catholic side, this has been the primary task of catechesis since the Würzburg Synod decision of 1974. In this regard, the analysis of the spiritual signs of the times in particular showed that a clear religious orientation

can no longer be assumed among pupils and all those involved in school. Such a situation is also reflected in the EMA.

The author ventured the positive prognosis that the project outlined not only contributes to strengthening the school community but can also possibly provide the breeding ground for the formation of a school spirituality that extends beyond didactic guiding principles by extending an inner-worldly perspective toward the transcendent and conveying a deeper offer of meaning through religious values. However, it should be noted that this is a “work in progress” in which even small advances and partial success are to be appreciated. Patience is required, especially regarding the spiritual-religious perspective, and under no circumstances should moralizing or even “proselytizing” take place. Spiritual anchors such as a concrete Christian perspective are thus to be understood fundamentally as an invitation, whose acceptance is naturally based on voluntariness. Religious education teachers, in particular, should set an example of tolerance and empathic communication here, while also demonstrating self-confidence (Domsel 2023); for example, by highlighting to critics the special significance and relevance to the life of religious education, especially in times of crisis.

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