



SEÇÃO: ARTIGOS LIVRES

The Covid 19 pandemic: a challenge for political theology and political religious education

La pandemia de Covid 19: un desafío para la teología política y la educación política religiosa

A pandemia de Covid 19: um desafio para a teologia política e a educação política-religiosa

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Recebido em: 17 dez. 2023.

Aprovado em: 25 mai. 2024.

Publicado em: 02 out.2024.

Abstract: Would the corona pandemic be an opportunity and a test for religious education? Would it be the space for existential questions? It may be that religious education, in its normative orientation toward freedom through an agenda hidden in its deep structures and practices, becomes less a school of the language of freedom than a school of particularity or even lack of freedom. To show the relevance of this critical-productive system, we proceed, through a theoretical-bibliographical approach, in three steps: first, an exemplary approach through the discourse of vulnerability; second, demonstrate its aporias; Finally, the political dimension of religious education is bypassed as an essential element, in its relevance as a critical-productive system.

Keywords: Pandemic. Covid 19. Religious Education. Vulnerability.

Resumen: ¿Será la pandemia del coronavirus una oportunidad y una prueba para la educación religiosa? ¿Sería el espacio para las cuestiones existenciales? Puede ser que la educación religiosa, en su orientación normativa hacia la libertad a través de una agenda oculta en sus estructuras y prácticas profundas, se convierta menos en una escuela del lenguaje de la libertad que en una escuela de la particularidad o incluso de la falta de libertad. Para mostrar la relevancia de este sistema crítico-productivo, procedemos, a través de un abordaje teórico-bibliográfico, en tres pasos: primero, un abordaje ejemplarizante a través del discurso de la vulnerabilidad; segundo, demostrar sus aporías; Finalmente, se deja de lado la dimensión política de la educación religiosa como elemento esencial, en su relevancia como sistema crítico-productivo.

Palabras clave: Pandemia. Covid 19. Educación Religiosa. Vulnerabilidad.

Resumo: A pandemia corona seria uma oportunidade e um teste para a educação religiosa? Seria o espaço para questões existenciais? Pode ser que a educação religiosa, na sua orientação normativa para a liberdade através de uma agenda oculta nas suas estruturas e práticas profundas, se torne menos uma escola de linguagem de liberdade do que uma escola de particularidade ou mesmo de falta de liberdade. Para mostrar a relevância deste sistema crítico-productivo, procede-se, através de uma abordagem teórico-bibliográfica, em três passos: primeiro, uma abordagem exemplar através do discurso da vulnerabilidade; segundo, demonstrar as suas aporias; finalmente, contorna-se a dimensão política da educação religiosa como um elemento essencial, em sua relevância enquanto sistema crítico-productivo.

Palavras-chave: Pandemia. Covid 19. Educação Religiosa. Vulnerabilidade.



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Introduction

During the Corona pandemic, the question was raised in Germany whether religious education was systemically relevant. After schools were initially closed in a hard lockdown, school subjects such as German, mathematics, Latin and English were successively taught again following the switch to digital instruction, but not religious education although it is a regular subject in Germany, it gives grades, it is relevant for promotion, just like history, biology or art. But after schools reopened, religious education was not the first thing to resume. For a long time it failed, even in church schools, which actually attach central importance to religious education in the canon of subjects. There is the sociological thesis that the pandemic has not primarily created new problems, but that it has reinforced and dynamized existing weaknesses and deficits of participation, stratification and justice with tremendous force and brutality. The progress that had been made in recent years in the field of emancipation and equality gave way to a relapse into the role constellation of the 1950s, where women had to do the care work, but now with the difference that they also had to reconcile this with their professional work and homeschooling their children. Certainly, the pandemic showed the big deficits in the process of digitization of a technical and media-pedagogical nature in the school, but at the same time unleashed an enormous innovation boost so that after more than 2 years of pandemic experience, hybrid teaching is now possible in almost all schools. And yet this does not eliminate the massive identity crises triggered by the pandemic, traumatization, disillusionment, acute social division, domestic violence in apartments that are far too small and digital devices not available. How should home schooling be didactically meaningful if the siblings have to share one device in a room? Educational injustice has increased massively. This is probably one of the reasons why educational sociology speaks of a lost generation (Aschauer; Eder; Höllinger, 2022). And here religious education is not supposed to be systemically relevant? Where is the place for

the big questions of young people about meaning, about justice, about orientation, about hope? Where is the space for the confrontation with an identity-forming, liberating message, and where is the space to problematize the social, ecclesiastical, economic mechanisms and structures of our present? Could it not be that we have an overly affirmative term for system relevance? Accordingly, what is systemically relevant is what supports the whole, what keeps it running.

But isn't this thinking too narrowly? Isn't this conceived too much from the point of view of systems theory, too much from the functioning of different wheels that interact with each other? Doesn't it also take sand in the gears? Not to destroy, but to interrupt, to push forward, to remember what has been repressed. For the Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin (1991a), the catastrophe consists precisely in the fact that – as he impressively puts it – it goes on and on. The emergency brake must be applied. System relevance would then no longer be understood as the functionalization of religious education and its affirmative integration into social, economic and cultural frameworks, as can be seen in a perhaps too rapid and too uncritical integration into the economically motivated competence orientation of school education or in sometimes too facile adaptations to citizenship education. Relevant to the system would then be a contribution to a system that would have to aim at justice and freedom, at equality and identity, recognition and participation, in short, at what is called a democratic system in an ambitious normative sense. The contribution of religious education would then consist in being a critical spike, in questioning the system itself, but at the same time in being a space for innovative interruptions, for experiences that give meaning, in order to remind the system of its own goal and to advance democratic forms of life. I call this a critically productive term of system relevance, where religious education has to prove itself. The corona pandemic would then be both an opportunity and a test for religious education: it would have to be the central space for the big

questions of adolescents in school, by playing in the liberating and critical message of God in the service of the autonomy of subjects and their responsibility for themselves and for one another. At the same time, however, it would have to ask itself whether it can actually correspond to this normative goal in its deep structures and practices. Because it could be that religious education in its normative orientation towards freedom through a hidden agenda in its deep structures and practices becomes less a language school of freedom than one of particularity or even lack of freedom.

In order to show this critical-productive system relevance, I proceed in three steps: Firstly I choose an exemplary approach via the vulnerability discourse, secondly to demonstrate its aporias, and finally, thirdly, to contour the political dimension of religious education as an essential element of the critical-productive system relevance of religious education.

Vulnerability as a principle of religious education in the pandemic

Probably like hardly any other phenomenon in the present besides the traumatic experiences of the Ukraine war, the pandemic confronts us with existential questions about meaning, about justice, about lost meanings, about death, pain and suffering. There are profoundly theological aspects that become relevant here: Questions of creation theology, insofar as the transmission of the coronavirus from animals to humans confronts us with questions of ecology, climate change. These are anthropological questions about how to deal with each other, with suffering, the sick, the weak. Enormous dynamics of solidarity and support of people for each other are awakened, although this is shaped in a specific way by the behavioral rule of social distancing. Freedom, sociality and responsibility gain a specific contour. The question of theodicy becomes significant, also the question of a punishing God, of the relationship between human freedom and God's freedom, between sin and redemption. How could God allow the suffering, the death of a hundred thousand, even millions of

innocent people? The theologian Magnus Striet (2021) is developing a theodicy-sensitive theology grouped around the idea of freedom in the context of the corona pandemic, which opposes the idea of a god who is acting directly in history and nature to stop the suffering.

On the other hand, the vulnerability, the exposure of the human being is shown here. In the pandemic, vulnerability becomes one of the central analytical categories for grasping the anthropological and social implications of the pandemic. Philosophically, Bernhard Waldenfels' (2020, 2022) phenomenology emphasizes the foreignness and alterity of the virus. The virus comes to me, confronts me, shows me my own non-identity, forces me to answer. And Judith Butler (2022) emphasizes this position in her new book which came out in 2022. In light of different theological studies of vulnerability, vulnerability becomes a human existential for understanding the christologically grounded history of salvation and the hope of resurrection. We find this kind of vulnerability discourse in German theology for example in the work of Hildegard Keul (2021) and most recently in the theology of the very prominent systematic theologian Knut Wenzel (2023) from the Goethe University in Frankfurt. The pictures of Pope Francis, alone on the St. Peter's Square, praying and giving his Easter blessings on Easter 2020 got an iconic quality for the existential and theological meaning of vulnerability.

In this context especially the Psalms got a new importance, even for non-confessionals. They can serve as a reservoir for finding meaning, as a treasure trove of linguistic patterns that can be used situationally to express exultant happiness, exuberant joy, but also irritations, fears, hardships, hope against everyone hope, despair. When he thinks about religious education in the pandemic, it is precisely the Psalms that Bert Roebben (2021, p. 363) ascribes such power to: „The Psalms [...] provide a language field for a wealth of experiences that are not unfamiliar to children and young people, such as violence, comfort, awe, joy, hope, etc. They can give them confidence in existential matters, in an existential

and transcendental sense". Accordingly, psalms offer a language to verbalize the insurmountable diversity and heterogeneity of experiences. As praise, lamentation, hope, and thanks, they can be the forums for asking the big questions, those unanswerable questions about meaning, justice, happiness, and reconciliation, in which adolescents find a language in their precarious search for identity and community can give. This is precisely why this also applies to people who are not religious or denominations (Schambeck, 2017).

In didactic refraction, such vulnerability is also a subject in religious education. Not only that in its anthropological dimension it has elevated the vulnerability of human life to the object of religious education and the reflexive handling of unavailability in the light of the hope of God to a normative educational goal. According to Arentz (2021), in terms of content, the experiential engagement with the message of a God who made himself vulnerable in Jesus should help to achieve this. However, this is also – formally, methodologically – related to the religious education itself, to the way teachers and students deal with each other. The religious pedagogian put it in these words:

Teachers, like the students, experience themselves as vulnerable during the pandemic because they have to deal with the restrictions, the fear and the flexibility imposed. In addition, they actively make themselves vulnerable when, beyond their resources, they keep finding new ways of maintaining the relationship with the students - up to and including visiting the house at the window. In addition, they bring a new perspective from their subject into the conversation with the pupils and parents, namely that 'wounds (can) connect'. From the sources of their faith and the great biblical story of Jesus, existential vulnerability and the call for solidarity and togetherness can be brought into a healing dialogue - even if it is only (and at least!) the promise of the Emmaus story that HE goes with them, especially with the desperate, disappointed and anxious (Arenz, 2021).

Consequently, religious pedagogy speaks of vulnerable situations in classrooms, where vulnerable religion would correlate with vulnerable youth and teachers. In this precisely, as Bert Roebben (2021, p. 365) summarizes, religious education would become "more than

ever system-relevant – and even more than that – system-breaking in the direction of the 'New Vulnerable We'".

Aporias of the Vulnerability Discourse

But is there a vulnerable we at all, as Roebben (2021) claims? Is there a vulnerability as such, as obviously in the theological discourse is assumed. Certainly, anthropologically it is possible to speak of an exposure and unavailability of the human being for himself, without rashly essentializing here. But does this apply to everyone to the same extent? At the beginning of the pandemic, it was said that the pandemic would make everyone the same. Everyone would be affected by the lockdown, everyone would have to live with restrictions, everyone would be affected by the risk of getting sick, of dying. In the meantime, sociological research has shown that the pandemic does not make everyone the same. Vaccines did not reach the countries of the Global South; people who were employed in the public sector had a secure income, while others were affected by unemployment. Children living in teacher households or professor households had very different coping potentials to deal with the pandemic than those living in cramped homes, often without digital devices, and exposed to trauma from violence. The achievement gap in the classroom widened dramatically as a result of the pandemic. Vulnerability is unequally distributed, as educationally impressively articulated. I quote from a very interesting book about the educational impact of the pandemic published by Sabine Krause and others: "We all 'are vulnerable, but not all are hurt'" (Obermayr *et al.*, 2021, p. 142). This is the reason why the concept of vulnerability is critically questioned, especially against the background of the pandemic. From a postcolonial perspective, this concept is countered by a theory of fragility that could take greater account of the political-structural implications (Bayramoglu; Varela, 2021). From the perspective of critical theory, Rahel Jaeggi (2016) has recently been very critical towards the concept of vulnerability, which is central to Judith Butler's work, and called

for a specification that would in principle take into account the inequalities between subjects. What is needed is a political-social framing of the vulnerability discourse. However, in view of what I have just said, this seems to be just as urgent for religious education. Otherwise it would remain abstract and thus affirmative.

Perspectives of a political religious education: first contours

If religious pedagogy, in the sense of a critical-constructive system relevance, wants to aim at a religious education that would actually be system-breaking, then it would have to spell itself out in political categories. In political science, the term 'politics' is understood as the dispute about the foundations (polity), the contents (policy), and the procedures (politics) by which a community is shaped (Grümme, 2023). In this context, I consider the theory of a political religious education to be extremely fruitful. Its specificity lies in the fact that it knows about the political significance of faith, but that it does not bring it into play immediately, but only in a theologically and didactically fractured form.

Theologically, the Christian faith has a mystical as well as political depth dimension, as can be shown more precisely with Karl Rahner, Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Johann Baptist Metz (Grümme, 2023). This means more than a mere social, interpersonal face-to-face level. For the Kingdom of God as a promise of universal justice and freedom for all. Faith also has a systemic dimension that concerns the structures themselves. And, more important, there is a dialectal relationship between theory and practice which is conveyed in political categories. Ultimately, one only knows who Jesus of Nazareth is when one embarks on the path of discipleship. Christology in this regard is a "political Christology" that does not leave world trade prices untouched. Christian knowledge is conveyed in the exercise of historically and socially situated freedom. "Theological knowledge is practical follow-up knowledge". Christianity therefore always contains a "mystical and a social component" (Metz, 1997, p. 165). This

shows the unmistakable political signature of the Christian faith. Mysticism and politics are not subordinate to each other, as some think. They form a permanent unit.

To the extent that creative and persistent efforts are made to build a just and humane world, and to the extent that all forces of injustice and oppression are opposed in the process, it only becomes 'understandable' what it means to the biblical God who wants peace and justice, to believe. And conversely, to the extent that one immerses oneself in the mystery of God, unsurpassably revealed in Jesus Christ, it becomes impossible to remain indifferent to the many faces of suffering and misery in the world (Mette, 1994, p. 258-259).

In addition to liberation theology with the option for the poor expressed in it in the Western European context, it was primarily the New Political Theology that conceptually worked out this political signature of Christianity. It was developed in different variants and with different nomenclature by Dorothee Sölle, by Jürgen Moltmann and last but not least by Johann Baptist Metz. This is about the explosiveness of the content of faith in terms of ideology and social criticism and the emphasis on the time core of each theological statement. As "speech from God in this time", it starts from the question: "Who practices theology - when and where - for whom and with what intention?" (Metz, 1997, p. 165). It bids farewell to a timeless and abstract concept of truth and reason and takes into account the fact that in the light of the Enlightenment, of Auschwitz and the end of Eurocentrism, Christianity "now has to prove itself in the face of a reason that can be understood as freedom, also as the freedom of others and thus as justice, wants to become practical" (Metz, 1994, p. 165). Christian hope, fed by the memoria resurrectionis as well as the memoria passionis and incorporated into a messianic expectation sharpened by the apocalyptic heritage, is articulated in engagement against social injustice, in solidarity with the oppressed and in the struggle for recognition of others in their otherness.

But there is still an imminent threat to this New Political theology: the politicization of religion, as we experience it in history or currently in Russia.

This danger is reduced to the extent that the biblical ban on images is taken to heart.

What does this mean for Religious education? For religious education, of course, this political dimension of faith can only be played in didactic refraction in the normative reference to the religious education of adolescents. Without the question of the educational value, without the orientation towards the freedom and autonomy of the adolescents, religious education itself would become a form of overpowering and foreign determination. If religious education understands itself as a language school of freedom, then it belongs to the core of religious education itself that the adolescents can also decide against religion. Moreover, it has to be made clear that the question of politics, the question of power and structures, is not the only and not the most important question of religious education. Karl Ernst Nipkow has pointed out that religious education always has cognitive, aesthetic, political, or even ethical-social dimensions that are mutually related. The political is thus one dimension of an integrative concept of religious education (Grümme, 2009).

Against this background, the specific contribution of religious education crystallizes, which can best be specified in light of the three categories of politics just mentioned:

At the level of the basis for action (polity) in politics, religious education can above all address value attitudes, willingness to act, civic and political commitment, and in this way itself make a contribution to political culture. How do we want to deal with each other in the pandemic as a society? For example, in the highly controversial issue of vaccination, how do we want to balance the freedom of the individual with the responsibility for everyone in the field?

The level of content (policy dimension) of politics draws the attention of religious education to the specificity of religious traditions with their horizon of meaning and their liberating as well as critical-transformative promises of salvation, which it can bring in. In the pandemic, this can contribute to the problematization of the self-evident, to the

politicization of the apolitical, to the interruption of unquestioned mentalities and ideologies, as well as to the orientation and perspectivization of content. Thus, religious education becomes a place where the big questions of adolescents, the handling of contingency and unavailability become an all time politically sensitive matter, asking for power of definition and hegemony.

On the level of procedure (politics), religious education is challenged in its formal, processual design. It essentially refers to a biblical promise with a claim to truth, which is subjected to critical evaluation in educational processes. I name some aspects:

Whether a religious education class is designed in an authoritarian or in a dialogical way, whether the students are involved in the identification of topics, in the selection of media and methods, whether they are trusted with the power and the potential to make a constructive contribution to the learning process themselves, even to do theology themselves, even if it could be, as Thomas Schlag (2019, p. 49) nicely puts it, it could be a "wild theology", whether they are seen in their contributions as essential carriers of teaching and thus already practice essential traits of democratic participation in religious education itself or not, whether pupils learn to settle conflicts in a regulated way, to perceive other opinions and to negotiate compromises, this is politically highly relevant (Grümme, 2023).

In this context, not only the questions of digital learning come into play. Of course: ZOOM and Microsoft Teams made education possible. It allows to contribute even when there is no possibility to attend conferences. But: There is no substitute for face-to-face encounters and learning together in the classroom, but the subjectivizing, always at the same time alienating factors of digitality in the context of a digital capitalism should not be underestimated either (Grümme, 2023).

Of course, this also includes that religious education examines itself with regard to its deep structures. A praxeological reading of religious education becomes sensitive to the hegemonic and exclusionary processes that may be working

within it even when it aims at recognition and support. This can be shown in the field of interreligious learning, inclusion, but also has its relevance under pandemic conditions (Grümme, 2021). There we find projections that work with the stereotype of the scapegoat mechanism, as can be seen in the catastrophic consequences of Donald Trump's speech about the Chinese virus. The result has been open violence against Asian-looking people worldwide. As has been shown in educational science, this is also of concern in schools. There, binary constructions are sometimes used, which designate the virus as the foreign, as the threatening, and thus construct those suffering from Corona as threatening authors of fear, suffering and death (Krause, 2021). That such a binary construction has taken on a socially destructive power beyond the pandemic is shown by the massive assaults to which Russian children in Germany were subjected in schoolyards after the start of the Ukraine war. Religious education must therefore enlighten itself in an ideology-critical way, must become aware of its hidden agenda and its power-shaped, hegemonic as well as identity-logical structures, in order not to become self-contradictory. Such a duty of self-enlightenment makes the pandemic a serious case for religious education.

Conclusion

In this context, the theology of compassion, as developed by Johann Baptist Metz, is important. Theology is shaped by the mysticism of compassion, as the author explains it as the key word of Christianity,

The mysticism of the Bible – in monotheistic traditions – is at its core a political mysticism. More specifically, a mysticism of political, social compassion. Your categorical imperative is: wake up, open your eyes! Jesus does not teach a mysticism of closed eyes, but a mysticism of open eyes and thus the unconditional obligation to be aware of the suffering of others (Metz, 2004, p. 8).

Religious education can also gain orientation from this, which is formulated in the face of the pandemic and which wants to be able to cope with its challenges.

If religious education were conceived and designed in this political sense, it would certainly not make things easy for itself and others. It would neither be reducible to the formal framework of a world view nor to a spirituality ultimately adapted to society, politics and culture. Rather, a political religious education would be a way of demonstrating the systemic relevance of religious education – but precisely in such a way that the system itself is put under normative pressure of its ongoing orientation toward democracy. Much remains to be done.

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Os textos deste artigo foram revisados pela Texto Certo Assessoria Linguística e submetidos para validação dos autores antes da publicação.