



THEO-WEB

21. Jahrgang 2022, Heft 1

Thema: „Exploring and Engaging Ambiguity in Religious Education“

Meyer, Karlo (2022). Documentation of the Symposium „Exploring and Engaging Ambiguity in Religious Education“ (ISREV 2021). *Theo-Web*, 21 (1), 5-7

<https://doi.org/10.23770/tw0230>



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Documentation of the Symposium „Exploring and Engaging Ambiguity in Religious Education“ (ISREV 2021)

von
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Abstract

Not only ethical issues of arms delivery to Ukraine or social issues on wokeness, nearly all topics of Religious Education are, by their very nature, laden with ambiguity and many of them may call past certainties into question. Social, ethical and genuinely theological convictions are all up for debate.

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With regard to social life, ambiguity is omnipresent. When first getting to know another person, much of the social dynamic is initially muddy and the boundaries of what is and isn't acceptable must be worked out. A humorous anecdote, for instance, may be intended to lighten the mood, but achieve the exact opposite if the issue raised is considered anything but a laughing matter by one's interlocutor. What is true for the individual level applies all the more to the macro level of social policy and politics.

The field of ethics, a cornerstone of religious education (RE), is equally rife with ambiguity. Every day people are called to make decisions on issues of ethical importance. Weighing up all the arguments for or against any conclusion is often far from an easy task. When a decision is particularly aggravating, it goes under another name. We call it an ethical "dilemma". These deserve special attention not only by educators.

Questions regarding theological issues may be even harder to answer categorically. The ultimate can be taken as an example: Who or what is God? For a comprehensive answer, one would need to occupy a position above the object of study - such as a scientist looking into a petri dish. Since such a perspective is impossible by definition, at least according to the Abrahamic traditions, the answer must remain - for the time being - ambiguous. Instead theologians use evocative language and symbolic metaphors.

Finally there is the realm of deeply personal, religious experiences. These may take place in prayer, during worship services, while singing, on a pilgrimage etc. Subsequent accounts of such experiences differ wildly, but often involve feelings of transcendence of ordinary reality. They may leave people frightened, awestruck or confused and are usually difficult to integrate into their previous frame of reference. Here ambiguity can be felt in its most powerful expression.

In summary, there are many areas of life in which ambiguity can be felt. A core task of RE is to foster tolerance of ambiguity or better to “dive into ambiguity” in order to better respond to the challenges which arise in the social, ethical and religious fabric of society. RE states that it is wrong to cling to a black-and-white view of the world. Such right-or-wrong ways of thinking raise certain perspectives above others and thereby hinder a constructive way to deal with ethical dilemmas and conflicts of a moral nature.

Certain traditions take a different approach. They try to resolve ambiguities by providing definitive answers and sweepingly categorical dogmas. These traditions are therefore generally referred to as fundamentalist. A self-reflecting didactics of religion cannot shy away from opposing such post-Enlightenment view, lest it allow pedagogy turn into demagogy. RE cannot stay neutral or maintain a descriptive outsiders perspective, but must rather promote deeper reflection of and confrontation with ambiguity and its lack of definitive answers.

In the history of ideas, the forties and fifties of the last century with the ideologically totalitarian systems they gave rise to provide important impulses for the elaboration of the concept of ambiguity. In philosophy, existentialists such as Simone de Beauvoir took it up, while at the same time a first empirical concept of ambiguity tolerance was developed by Else Frenkel-Brunswick. At the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s first scales measuring intolerance of ambiguity were developed, e.g. by Stanley Budner.

The following collection of essays on ambiguity is the result of an international symposium, held at the biannual Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV) in July 2021. We start with an essay by Kerstin von Brömssen, Gothenburg, on the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and the educational scholar Paulo Freire. During the 1940's de Beauvoir described basic phenomena of our society using the category “ambiguous”. With her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, she influenced Paulo Freire and his method of Liberatory Learning including his dialogical approach. Living in a changing world requires us to adopt a model of education that deals with the ambiguities of life using dialogue. Brömssen argues that the fundamental existential questions should still be asked in Ethics and Religious Education today, especially in the face of neoliberal tendencies in politics and pedagogy.

While many aspects of society may have changed in the last 75 years, the socio-political need to deal with ambiguity must still be reckoned with. Thomas Schlag from Zurich,

takes up the political aspect as task for RE. He argues in favor of the cultivation of democratic consciousness which implies the acquisition of tolerance of ambiguities that originates in the study of political conflicts. RE can provide an education supporting values such as human dignity, equality regardless of gender, race etc. Such an approach is needed to oppose the anti-democratic attitudes in many countries.

On a different level, a reflective understanding of *theological* matters requires the ability to cope with ambiguity as well. Stefanie Lorenzen from Bamberg, explores didactic concepts for RE considering matters of ambiguity. One of her criteria is how these approaches shape the concept of ambiguity itself.

Lorenzen distinguishes between two currents: on the one hand, approaches taking up ethical and social ambiguities and, on the other hand, approaches which deal with the ambiguities of religious communications. This distinction may help to build a systematic tableau of ambiguity for further research. A discussion of the connection with Karlo Meyer's four mode typology provides further impulses.

When it comes to actual classroom teaching, textbooks play a major practical role. Susanne Schwarz, Landau, presents five criteria of how to deal with ambiguity and analyses three textbooks selecting appropriate chapters. As a result she identifies two major strategies to deal with ambiguities: Some books have a tendency to teach the acceptance of existing ambiguities partly aiming at a synthesis of conflicting aspects, other books have unifying tendencies partly eliminating the ambiguity. A further result is the different treatment of interreligious themes and of Christian topics (in German denominational RE).

With regard to an empirical look at the pupils and their strategies of accepting or tolerating ambiguity, there are already various questionnaires that could be used, but they remain on a rather general level and do not take theological questions into account. Karlo Meyer from Saarland examines two scales measuring tolerance of ambiguity. In a wider sample and a preliminary test, he correlates these scales with items concerning religious and general social-ethical questions. He finds significant correlations and suggests modifying one of the existing scales for the need of research in RE.

None of the five essays claims to be exhaustive on the topic or to provide completely new concepts of research, but rather present first steps in very different areas. They are rather introductions and first insights to different levels in which further research and in-depth studies on ambiguity and ambiguity tolerance could and should follow.