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**THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR AS STORY-TELLER:  
SUGGESTIONS FROM PAUL RICOEUR'S WORK**

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**Abstract**

Contrary to what the dominant meta-narrative and what the mass media have taught, narrative religious education should follow a hermeneutic of fiction. It should be, in other words, education in perception, in seeing, and in hearing, a school of fictionality and imaginative variation, and a school of responsiveness, remembering, and solidarity. Fictionality means to realize the "difference," to realize the "it-could-be-otherwise" in order to play imaginatively with new worlds. Responsiveness means not only to be aware of the otherness of the other, but, as we can say with Ricoeur, learning to see oneself as another.

**THE ELIMINATION OF FICTION:  
CONGELATION OF RELIGION**

Violence, exploitation, self-destruction, catastrophic risk for the ecology, and the human alienation in all its dimensions are our reality. The disenchantment of the world, the growing assumption of power by forces of rationalization and technology, and the project of modernity seemingly has turned into an iron cage. This leaves little room for fiction.

This does not mean that there are no narratives in our world, but that narrativity has been distorted or disfigured. It is the perspective of Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984; 1986; 1988) that the reality of our world is governed and colonized by meta-stories. The project of modernity comes with legitimization stories that narrate the emancipation of reason and liberty, the salvation by capitalistic progress,

or the schedule of a kind of Christianity-based teleology (which is a rather distorted version of Christian eschatology).

This meta-narrative, to be sure, is a specific kind of story: it is the legitimization myth of modernity; and it is the myth that explains that it could *not* be otherwise. The distortion of narrativity is characterized by the following difference: meta-narratives eliminate names; they are not told to remember people. Meta-narratives are Big Stories and differ from "small" narratives in that names and all kinds of particularities are eliminated in order to form *The Story* (Lyotard 1988, 221).

This project of modernity, Lyotard contends, has not been forgotten or given up, but it has encountered serious difficulties. Auschwitz is the paradigmatic name for the tragically "unfinished" character of modernity, Lyotard says. How can the big legitimization stories still sound credible? How can they, despite their questionable credibility, continue to be told very effectively by the mass media? If Lyotard is right in his characterization of the quintessence of the meta-story of modernity as the narrative of negative entropy, it is obvious that by definition "fiction"—the creative alternative, the not-governed-by-disposition, the never-heard-of, and the unexpected—has been eliminated. Meta-stories, especially that of negative entropy, make other stories irrelevant and exclude other narratives, for they pretend self-sufficiency. Have we come already into a situation in which storytelling has no chance and has come to an end?

The mass media themselves have their share in the destruction of fiction. The philosopher Günther Anders alerts us to the disfiguration of human freedom and creativity by mass media communication. Anders (1956, 107) contends that the "running pictures" and the machines that deliver them *replace speaking*; that they take from us the necessity to speak up and make us dependent; that "*perception*" has become problematic and antiquated (cf. 1980, 54); and, of special importance for our theme, that "*fictionality*" is being destroyed, especially when the fictional event assumes the character of a real event, for it is produced and communicated in the same way as information about real events (1956, 143).<sup>1</sup>

These radical analyses shed light on the very heart of our concern—religion, as I will try to demonstrate, for the key theme of

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion about mass media and narrative religious education, see Streib 1998.

salvation. More specifically, Lyotard's radical critique of the meta-narrative alerts us for the fragility of religious narrativity, it alerts us for the restriction or elimination of fictionality in religion, and it alerts for the congelation of religion.

"Salvation" can be interpreted by the symbol of redemption of men and women with God. However, for a large number of religious communities "salvation" is understood as concerning only the individual soul, as if it had nothing to do with the body and with society. Such a limited version of "salvation" and "redemption" can easily be integrated in a subordinated place of the narrative that legitimizes the status-quo of our world—not to speak of the opium quality of religion.

What has happened here? One explanation would be to attest to an exclusion of parts of the salvation story. The yearning for the work of healing and justice in our world has been eliminated from the salvation story. The impact of religious vision and prophecy aiming also at the work of healing the world has been sacrificed. And it would need to be proposed that, despite the theological necessity to distinguish between the two meanings of salvation, *Heil* and *Wohl* in German theological terms, the two cannot be separated and the one side must not be held up at the cost of the other.

The English word "salvation," as Paul Tillich emphasizes, is able and is meant to embrace both meanings. Jürgen Moltmann has been influential in bringing both sides into a balance by emphasizing the political meaning of salvation. Another explanation seems even more convincing, but should make us even more concerned. It is the supposition that, in these cases, the *narrative* of salvation has been congealed into a *theory* of salvation—at the cost not only of entire dimensions of salvation, but also at the cost of its innovative and creative potential. And the cure for this would consist in regaining the narrativity of the salvation story.

This is an even more congealed form of religion, for an even more restricted use of fiction appears in fundamentalism. Fundamentalism, it can be stated, is characterized by the almost complete elimination of fiction. The fundamentalist manifesto demands and makes people subscribe to a literal understanding of the holy book; and it is enacted that all scientific results that contradict the religious truth (in fundamentalist interpretation, of course) have to be dismissed.

How about the sciences that are in line with the literal understanding of the religious texts? These are not only tolerated, but also

held up as they were holy texts themselves. The fundamentalist language, if we take the argumentation used in creationism or millennialism as examples, allows as much fictionality as ordinary natural science language in the 19th century. The religious story about the beginning and the end and the salvation story of humanity is told as if they were natural science theories. Fundamentalism has its own meta-story, which structurally resembles the meta-story of modernity. And in fact fundamentalism is a product of modernity and is *modern* anti-modernism. It is the explicit declaration of the death of fiction in religion.

That not only fictionality, but also narrativity is suppressed in fundamentalism, could easily be demonstrated by some quotes from interviews with members of fundamentalist groups whom we interviewed in our research in progress at the University of Bielefeld. Fundamentalists can hardly tell their personal story, but answer with quotes from the Bible and recount only the meta-story that is told by the fundamentalist group in which the standardized personal fate has been integrated. To fundamentalists, life history, biography, and autobiography belong, as it were, to a foreign language. The interviewers had a hard time getting fundamentalists to talk personally, to tell something that would fit into the framework of narrative interviews.

These disfigurements are only the overstatement of a danger that is imminent to every kind of religion: that concreteness takes over, that symbols are made into things, that religious rituals are used for magic manipulation, and that religion has been congealed into a fiction-less disfiguration. The absence of fiction is not the relapse in religious business as usual, but it means to give in to forces of manipulation and alienation. Religion can be either creative or congealed.

Is there an alternative, a reversal for such distortion, and a healing development and learning process? The chance of regaining the symbolic quality of religious texts and rituals, of regaining the narrativity of religious language, and of developing a new appreciation of fictionality depends on a clarification in hermeneutics.

#### LIBERATING RELIGION: THE POWER OF FICTION TO REMAKE REALITY

The work of healing the world as response to and inspired by our religious visions requires and features a specific understanding of how religious language and religious texts accomplish this task. It

requires a hermeneutic of vision or, as I would like to say, a hermeneutic of fiction that relates the human alienation to salvation and healing in all dimensions. What would be the adequate form of such a hermeneutic of fiction? Here the work of Paul Ricoeur provides promising insights.

Ricoeur's philosophical analyses provide great insights in the hermeneutics of symbol, of metaphor (1975a), and of narrative (1983a; 1984; 1985). His book on identity, in which we find the most advanced conceptualization of narrative identity, is his (1990) *Soi-même comme un autre (Oneself as Another)*. Briefly I attempt to summarize the points of Ricoeur's philosophy, which are of special importance for a hermeneutic of fiction.

### *The "Detour" or the "Roundabout Way"*

It is a basic structure of Ricoeur's philosophy to develop a hermeneutics of suspicion, to promote critique of illusions, and to confront philosophy and common-sense understanding with sharp critique in so far that they rest on the assumption of a self-sufficient, self-reflexive ego.<sup>2</sup> In his analyses of metaphor and of narrative, he is fighting, as he explains, on two fronts and argues against two misperceptions: one is the exclusivity of *rational explanation* and the other is the illusion of *immediate understanding*.

Explanation and the descriptive use of language are not problematic or false in themselves, but become so when they are taken as the only and exclusive approaches, especially when we deal with such multi-dimensional phenomena as symbols, metaphors, and narratives. Fiction cannot be accounted for adequately in these categories. Also, for religion, I maintain, descriptive language promotes a reductionistic approach; religion does not fit into this strait-jacket with its (illusory) aiming toward the identity of the *idem*, for this kind of identity is the death of fiction, the exclusion of the it-could-be-otherwise. Religion, when put into this strait-jacket, has lost its symbolic multi-dimensionality. The surplus of meaning of the symbol, the vehemence and power of living metaphor, and the creativity of narrative have been sacrificed on the altar of concreteness.

<sup>2</sup> I have explicated this in regard to Fowler's (1981) faith development theory in Streib 1991b; cf. also Streib 1994.

On the other front, Ricoeur cannot follow the diltheyian enthusiasm with *understanding* when understanding is taken as immediate intuition or is based on the assumption of some kind of congeniality between the author and the reader. Ricoeur

cannot accept the irrationalism of immediate understanding, conceived as an extension to the domain of the texts of the empathy by which a subject puts himself in the place of a foreign consciousness in a situation of face-to-face intensity. This undue extension maintains the romantic illusion of a direct link of congeniality between the two subjectivities implied in the work, that of the author and that of the reader. (1983b, 194)

Instead, Ricoeur suggests to take the "roundabout way." He argues that there is no other way to arrive at understanding the world and at self-understanding than taking the "detour": "In contrast to the tradition of the *cogito* and to the pretension of the subject to know itself by immediate intuition, it must be said that we understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works" (1975b, 143).

In regard to our theme of fiction, these strong theses of Ricoeur underscore the necessity of mediation: when the illusory shortcut of immediacy has been exposed, we see the need for mediation. And fiction is one of the textual manifestations that accomplish mediation. More precisely, fiction is the prominent *gestalt* of that mediation. This is obvious when we now take a closer look into the working of semantic innovation.

### *Fiction As Semantic Innovation*

All three linguistic forms that have been the foci of Ricoeur's reflection have at least one element in common: they work with *difference* and *variation*; and all depart from and resist a one-dimensional understanding of language as descriptive one-to-one-relation. This is true in particular for narrative fiction. Fiction—this defines the sharp contrast to teleologies and meta-stories—implies a specific difference: the notion that it could be otherwise. Fiction has a double reference: it refers to a particular situation, a person, a group—these are represented predominantly in the story material, the characters of the fictional narrative; and it points to a fictional alternative, the entirely new invention of a fictional plot. Fiction is an *it-could-be-*

*otherwise-story*. Fiction is the prominent form of what in social phenomenology has been called the "consciousness of difference (*Differenzbewußtsein*)" (Grathoff 1995).

The act of understanding a fictional narrative can be paralleled to the workings of metaphor. It involves a similar dialectic between explanation and understanding. In the process of understanding a metaphor, a new semantic relevance emerges from the ruins of semantic non-relevance as this appears in a literal reading of the sentence. Fiction is semantic innovation. A hermeneutic of fiction is a hermeneutic of semantic innovation, of narrative variation.

In his book on identity, Ricoeur has given us a powerful metaphor for the workings of this semantic innovation of fiction in narrative identity: the laboratory for thought experiments. "Literature," he says there, "proves to consist in a vast laboratory for thought experiments in which the resources of variation encompassed by narrative identity are put to the test of narration" (1990, 148).

### *Fiction and Transfiguration*

It may be surprising, at first sight, that Ricoeur in his phrase "fiction has the power to 'remake' reality" links "reality" and the "power" to change it to one of the seemingly most unrealistic literary forms: fictional narrative. But only at first sight. When we take a closer look in the work of Ricoeur, we find fiction as one of the key concepts in his perspective on how collective and personal life can do both—develop an identity and experience change and transformation.

Ricoeur made the following observation:

Narrative fiction "imitates" human action, not only in that, before referring to the text, it refers to our own pre-understanding of the meaningful structures of action and of its temporal dimensions, but also in that it contributes, beyond the text, to reshaping these structures and dimensions in accordance with the imaginary configuration of the plot. Fiction has the power to "remake" reality and, within the framework of narrative fiction in particular, to remake real praxis to the extent that the text intentionally aims at a horizon of new reality which we may call a world. It is this world of the text which intervenes in the world of action in order to give it a new configuration or, as we might say, in order to transfigure it. (1983b, 185)

What, in the theory of the symbol, Ricoeur has identified as the "surplus of meaning," and what, in the theory of metaphor, he

called the "ontological vehemence" of "living" metaphor, in the theory of narrative is paralleled by the "transfiguring power of emplotment." All these literary forms—it is Ricoeur's merit to have invested intense analytical sharpness and voluminous writing to bring this to our attention—have in common this gift of "new worlds," however, with different reach and reference to the context. It is the special feature of the last of the three double-meaning expressions, narrative, to refer to a *text* and to refer inevitably to a *context*. This is expressed in the above quote: in both reference directions, pre-understanding and transfiguration, narrative fiction refers to structures of *action*, to *temporal* dimensions, and to a world of action. When, therefore, for Ricoeur, fiction is the key term also for truth, it is clear that the truth claim of fiction consists precisely in its transfiguring power, which is aimed toward the world of action.

In *Soi-même comme un autre*, Ricoeur has given an account of the transfiguring power of fiction primarily in regard to our personal identity and biography.<sup>3</sup> Consistent with his sharp critique of the exclusivity of the philosophy of the ego, Ricoeur declares one-sided and insufficient the taken-for-granted understanding of identity as sameness. With the help of the distinction between *idem* and *ipse*, he is able to put a new and even more important kind of identity in sharp relief: *ipse*-identity or selfhood.

We can discern, therefore, two kinds of permanence in time, the "perseverance of character" and the "constancy of self in promising," in keeping one's word (1990, 124). And already in this basic distinction, the role and significance of fiction becomes clear. While *idem*-identity or sameness is constituted by a self-identical subject, a self-identical substantial kernel of the person, and is therefore not so much dependent on other resources, *ipse*-identity or selfhood owes itself to the mediation by cultural works, and narratives in particular. It is dependent on narrative fiction, and it takes shape in the "laboratory of thought experiments."

Thus, Ricoeur can talk about the narrative unity of life as "an unstable mixture of fabulation and real experience." And he goes on to say that

<sup>3</sup> Comp. my article, "Erzählte Zeit als Ermöglichung von Identität" (Streib 1994), in which I work this out in more detail in order to outline the implications for religious education. The argument there is parallel to the one in this article here, but there I focus more on the discussion with developmental psychologies and with post-modern conditions for narration.

it is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively, after the fact, prepared to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of emplotment borrowed from fiction or from history. . . . And we also have the experience, however incomplete, of what is meant by ending a course of action, a slice of life. (162)

Narrative identity is the outcome (however provisional) of that kind of narrative interaction in which we read and relate to the variety of narratives that surround us. When personal identity is understood as narrative identity, the subject appears both as a reader and the writer of his or her life. Because, as Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative* (1985, 246) says, "the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told."

The ground and basis of ethics results from the very concept of selfhood. And this is of great relevance also for religion. The idea is condensed in the title of Ricoeur's 1990 study, *Soi-même comme un autre / Oneself as Another*. It is the idea of the primacy of the Other. Selfhood and the kind of permanence in time that belong to selfhood is constituted by the response to an Other, to the Other's calling me, to the Other's need, and to the Other's desire to count on me. Hence it is the promise to keep my word in faithfulness, to be responsive and responsible despite all the change in time that characterizes the identity of the self.

The perspective of narrative identity and of identity as selfhood has decisive ethical implications. Ricoeur (1990, 164) writes: "The thought experiments we conduct in the great laboratory of the imaginary are also explorations in the realm of good and evil. Transvaluing, even devaluating is still evaluating. Moral judgment has not been abolished; it is rather itself subjected to the imaginary variations proper to fiction."

### *Religion, Fiction, and the Remaking of Reality*

From Ricoeur's philosophical analyses, theology and religious studies can derive great insights in the surplus of meaning of symbol, the creativity and ontological vehemence of metaphor, and the transfiguring power of narrative. The hermeneutics of fiction that I have tried to outline above can be especially instructive for a hermeneutics of religious narratives.

There is no direct avenue, no immediate shortcut to arrive at understanding the religious truth and to arrive at a more faithful self-understanding. Neither the reduction to *explanation*, or worse: the congelation of the religious narratives into descriptive use of language and, take as example the salvation story, into a *theory*, and worst: their congelation into a quasi-natural science theory, on the one hand, can be suggested for a hermeneutics of fictional religious narratives. Nor, on the other hand, the resort to *understanding* by immediate intuition, or worse: the (illusionary) assumption of a congeniality of today's reader with the authors of religious texts—which is a widespread assumption in which church membership, reported conversion experiences, or simply powerful rhetoric is taken as proof of such congeniality—is the way to account for the creative and transfiguring power of the religious narrative. We all—whether religious people or not—are invited to take the detour and to engage in the hermeneutical enterprise. To contradict these two dangers to the hermeneutics of religious texts makes it more resistant against the virus of modernity: the secular, quasi-religious, and explicitly religious meta-narratives.

It is the character of it-could-be-otherwise-stories told in the religious communities, it is the feature of this kind of semantic innovation that is able—by means of its double reference—to relate the human alienation in its concreteness and particularity to salvation in all its dimensions. The structure of the parables in the Bible could serve as a model to demonstrate the procedure of the hermeneutics of fiction. This becomes more obvious when we understand the parables as the story form of metaphor which, according to Ricoeur (1975a), can reveal its "ontological vehemence" as "living metaphor."

What a hermeneutics of fiction features and nurtures is the consciousness of difference. And to engage in this kind of hermeneutical enterprise is to set in motion the laboratory for thought experiments. To refer, in such more than serious matters as religion and the Holy, to such a playful model seemingly suggests to decide at pleasure; but this is not the case. The notion that it could be otherwise appears as dangerous memory in a world which, due to its congelation and colonialization by meta-narratives, is opposed to selfhood and subjectivity.

Johann Baptist Metz (1977) has explicated this in the terms of narrative theology when he talks about the Christian church as community of remembering and story-telling that passes on and nurtures dangerous memories. Becoming a self before God as expression for

the development of Christian faith that concerns also the work of justice in the world must not be congealed into an understanding of salvation as limited to the individual soul. To understand faith as anamnestic solidarity (cf. Peucker 1976) is to listen and be responsive to stories; these stories are stories of the Other, also of the forgotten people, the oppressed, and the victims of history. Here it becomes obvious how far the Christian narrative is from being a meta-narrative in Lyotard's terms.

### THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR AS STORY-TELLER: NARRATIVE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

What I hope to have made visible in the previous section is the *richness* and *precision* that a hermeneutics of fiction can achieve when it is inspired by the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. The philosopher's analysis aims beyond reminding religious educators of their occasional role as story-tellers and their power as narrators—this has been done repeatedly in the literature on methods in religious education—it suggests as well a specific conceptualization of religious education, of the process of learning, of formation (*Bildung*), and of the development of religious identity.<sup>4</sup> A different understanding and praxis in religious education is suggested, when we accept the idea that fictional narratives and prophetic visions have the power to transfigure the world.

Based on this perspective, I elaborate my proposal to understand and accentuate religious education in terms of narratology, to talk of *narrative religious education*. Even though this proposal can refer to roots in narrative theology and understands itself as part of a "narrative turn" in the scientific study of religion,<sup>5</sup> I am aware that I propose something not very common-sense. However, the narrative approach is one of the most adequate in our "communities of remembering and storytelling." Therefore, I want to summarize the implication of the hermeneutics of fiction for religious education.

<sup>4</sup> This is the horizon to which I point in my article (Streib 1994), which I already mentioned above.

<sup>5</sup> Comp. Day 1993; Day and Tappan 1996; Freeman 1985; Gergen 1994; also Streib 1998.

### *Turn the Mass Media Off—Go Out To Make Ex-Perience*

Religious education and its narrative approach are affected by, and entangled in, the modern development of mass media and myths. Compared with the entertainment quality and the effectivity and perfection of mass media productions, the religious educator when telling a story often feels ashamed and imperfect, and that—much worse—the use of narratives in religious education appears as out-moded. Is the narrative approach in religious education antiquated already?

In the article, "Mass Media, Myth, and Narrative Religious Education" (Streib 1998), I conclude that, though the mass media may present a serious challenge, narrative identity that invites *selfhood* and *subjectivity*; *particularity* and *pluralism*; *subversiveness* and *difference*, has a chance, if we keep the mass media out from religious education as much as possible. And I question whether we should promote religious television shows, software production for religious education, or computer games with religious themes, because the danger of such productions is not only that they risk turning religion and religious themes into entertainment packages, but that this supports the (in my point of view) misleading assumption that religious education is not more than instruction of a certain body of knowledge or the acquaintance with a set of propositions.

Finally there is too big a danger to buy the meta-narrative that is transported by the mass media. Only a kind of very limited appreciation for electronic communication may be suggested that is consistent with the criteria of narrative subversiveness. Stories told by films and videos can be of value, provided that they tell a narrative that contributes to selfhood, if they feature fictionality, diachronicity, and particularity, and if they present, as Metz would say, "dangerous memories" and tell "subversive narratives."

Instead of taking the risk of an instrumentalizing and colonializing use of religion, religious educators should learn to trust the living narrative to elicit the students out of their world and make experience. We should take here the word "experience" in the literal Latin meaning of *ex-perire*, to go out, to go on a journey—in fantasy and imagination and in actually going on an excursion. The educational approach of encounter and actually going at certain places has been suggested decisively in inter-religious learning, in proposals for learn-

ing about the other religions; but this "method" of learning has implication for religious education in a much broader sense.

***Elicit Students Onto the Detour:  
Practice Listening to Symbols and Stories***

The detour or roundabout way is proposed by Ricoeur as a structure of hermeneutics in general and of a hermeneutics of fiction in particular. Each of its negative and positive meanings has implications for methods of religious education. The necessity of the detour is exposed in exclusivity avenues: explanation and immediate understanding. And the necessity of the detour contradicts the occasional use of symbols and stories for only decorative and rhetoric purpose. Therefore, in religious education, descriptive and explanatory use of language should reside in the background, and the language of immediacy should not be nurtured, but religious educators should become specialists in luring students on the detour of listening and relating to symbols and narratives.

That this explanation is not a sufficient approach, especially when dealing with higher symbol systems such as religion, can hardly be denied. However, despite that, the praxis of religious education—and this is true not only for the German situation, I imagine—has a strong cognitive and explanatory focus. Certainly, much has to be explained and much has to be learned, if young people are introduced to the realm of religions and their own faith tradition. There is a necessary body of knowledge about church history and the contemporary religious situation, about the creeds and truth claims of one's religious tradition, and about the ethical and political implications of one's belief. But although this might be necessary, it is not sufficient. It should be made clear to the students implicitly and explicitly that descriptive and explanatory use of language is not sufficient.

There is a sharp distinction between narration and argumentation. As Jerome Bruner says, "There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinct ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another. . . . They differ radically in their procedure for verification. A good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds." This distinction, of course, has the aim of a greater appreciation and valuing of the narrative. Narrative defines a language game of its own. It is not a game of rational discourse,

of competing for the best argument, but the game of story telling. In contrast to an argument or a proposition that is supposed to correspond to reality as close as possible, narrative invites a fictional perspective.

The alternative road that religious educators might find attractive, when they realize the insufficiency of descriptive and explanatory use of language, may be described as the approach featuring immediate understanding. The hermeneutical assumption of a congeniality of today's reader with the author often is superimposed by the assumption that only truly religious—or even only second-born—people can understand the biblical texts. But even without featuring such exaltation, it is a widespread assumption that, when the development of religion and faith is the aim, hermeneutics can be—or needs to be—left behind, and instead all kinds of immediacy are welcome; for example, the recommendation to focus on the encounter with religious symbols, but to use and rely on the *inner eye*.<sup>6</sup>

While I want to appreciate the emotional depth and life-structuring power of such encounter with religious symbols, it risks playing down or even eliminating reflection. Here the discussion on the use of symbols in religious education is well advised to take up the idea that Ricoeur has mentioned at the end of *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960): "*second naïveté*." If we follow Ricoeur's argument, "*second naïveté*" is the kind of intense and life structuring significance of symbols that surpasses, but presupposes critical reflection. Therefore, despite the widespread misuse of Ricoeur's formula in support of a non-reflexive immediacy, it needs to be kept in mind that "*second naïveté*" belongs to a *hermeneutical* theory that asks, from the perspective of *critical* reflection, the question of whether there is a development beyond that critique. Ricoeur later explicitly states that the assumption of immediate understanding is not an adequate hermeneutical model.

Ricoeur's model of the detour stands in contrast to both one-dimensional models of *explanation*, which features a mono-directional line of description or analysis, and *immediate understanding*, which features the dimension of face-to-face encounter. The detour instead features new dimensions, a triangle, as it were. It invites the

<sup>6</sup> "*Das innere Auge*" is the title of a book of religious education that takes an approach of working with symbols and promotes, in the so-called "*Symboldidaktik*," such an approach of immediacy.

practice of multi-perspectivity and semantic innovation. To invite students onto the detour means to introduce them to the world of symbols which, in the first place, requires an introduction and acquaintance with the symbolic use of language and with the double-meaning character of these forms of cultural and religious manifestations. This introduction implies to get a sense of the surplus of meaning and of the ontological vehemence of this kind of double-sense expressions.

In the second place, it would be necessary to introduce students to the content-related meaning of a specific set of symbols that is of relevance to one's own religious tradition. What is meant by sin, guilt, and evil, by grace, salvation, and redemption, and by spiritual presence and healing, is contained in symbols that deserve attention and reflection that need to be interpreted. And this requires that the religious educator reserve for the religious symbols a prominent place.

However, of special value and importance for the hermeneutical detour in religious education is the introduction of narratives. Narratives refer in a more decisive way to the context, to temporality. Here, what has been said about narrative fiction—that it refers (in reference to our pre-understanding) to a world of action and that the imaginary configuration refers to a (fictional) "world of the text," to a new reality—qualifies the narrative detour as most adequate also for religious education. The conviction and starting point of narrative theology, that the language of religion is fundamentally narrative in structure, has to be applied in religious education. Therefore, I would suggest to move on from symbol-centered religious education ("*Symboldidaktik*") to narrative religious education.

### ***Familiarize Students with the Laboratory for Thought Experiments***

A laboratory has an experimental task; it plays with possibilities and hypotheses and puts them to test. This already implies a delimitation. A totalitarian system, a fundamentalist group, or an infallible church does not need a laboratory for thought experiments; on the contrary, questions and playing with alternatives may be regarded as dangerous and may be prohibited. In terms of narrative analysis, it can be stated that, in systems that are colonized by a meta-narrative that is implicitly or explicitly sacrosanct, a laboratory for thought experiments has no place. This, however, would be a disfiguration of

religion and a contradiction of the "freedom of a Christian" and of religious freedom in general. It follows from this that religious education needs to promote pluralism and tolerance, rather than the streamlining and congruency of a collective religious identity. Religious education, therefore, has to refrain from any dominating, colonializing use of religious narratives, as if they were meta-narratives; on the contrary, such (mis-) use should be subjected to critical discussion in religious education.

Religious education is a laboratory of thought experiments. This model appears to me most adequate, for it elaborates and builds upon the detour model by giving stronger reference to the student's life-world, and it accentuates more decisively the playfulness and experimentation with a variety of narrative possibilities. This is very inspiring for religious education and for other fields in practical theology, as well.<sup>7</sup> To set this model into motion, a series of steps can be suggested.

For the first step, narrative religious education will attend to the "world of action," which, in the hermeneutical scenario, is called pre-understanding. This refers to the life-world of the person who begins to engage in narrative experimentation. Because this life-world and situation comes in story form, we could say that the first step consists in listening and bringing to expression the everyday stories and everyday myths of the students; in the German discussion, this is called everyday orientation ("*Alltagsorientierung*") or experience-relatedness ("*Erfahrungsbezug*"). Within these every day stories, we can discern also the meta-stories, for we do not live on an island apart from civilization and we cannot ignore the industrial revolutions of modernity that influence the everyday world of every single person.

In a special department of our laboratory—still part of the first step—this making explicit the pre-understanding is focused on working with people's own life stories, namely, the autobiographical reflection department.<sup>8</sup> It is the leading assumption there that the person who undertakes the experiments is the reader of his or her own life story, which in oral or written form will become a text that later can be rewritten and changed.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of the implications of the narrative approach for the field of pastoral care and counseling see my article, "Heilsames Erzählen" (Streib 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Comp. my article on "Autobiographical Reflection and Faith Development" (Streib 1991a).



A variety of methods belong to the second step. Some of the options are to invent a continuation of the story, to rewrite the story from a different perspective (for example, from an other person's perspective), or to engage in imaginative variation, in Ricoeur's terms. In this imaginative variation, a variety of narratives, mostly fiction, feed into this process. A more explicit way of reference to fictional narratives would be to rewrite the story by using story grammar elements of other stories (for example, to rewrite the story using the character set of a fairy tale or the plot structure of a Bible story).

A specific focus of *religious* education is that, according to the proposal for the narrative theology of Metz, not only story-telling, but also "remembering" and "(anamnetic) solidarity" are categories. These should be honored also in the laboratory for thought experiments. Religious education should engage especially in remembering particular events and people who have names; or to rewrite the stories by referring to particularity and to names. It has to deal with the question, "Whose story is listened to?" Small narratives and small-life-world narratives should be honored and held up over against meta-narratives. Of very special interest are the stories of the victims of history and the story of The Victim of history. It will give the story a special significance and structure, when it is the result of fictional invention or imaginative variation that is inspired by this special kind of memory and solidarity.

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