Holistic Religious Education or bits and pieces?

The task of religious education in fragmented frameworks

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Abstract

The field of religious education presents teachers and researchers with basic questions concerning education, meaning-making, morality and religion in society. The role of the teacher is under discussion, as illustrated by one kindergarten teacher: ‚There is no wholeness […] it is bits and pieces'. This article is a philosophical essay evolving around the questions: Is holistic religious education possible and plausible, and if it is, how do the various approaches and traditions serve to support a sense of holism both for the adult and for children? The discussion refers to a background of contextual theology and a typology of attitudes towards the meaning of religion in the context of public education, ending with suggested didactical metaphors that may bridge religion and education in a mainly secular society.[1]

1. Introduction

Some twenty years ago I interviewed kindergarten teachers about the place given to Christian traditions and stories in kindergarten practice. One of them told me that if there is a teacher who ‚feels at home' with the Christian message, she is usually the one who is asked to ‚take that part'. The ideal is that ‚the whole thing should be authentic to the children'.[2] Then she added, ‚Still there is no wholeness [...]. Not in the education we give here, about Christianity, or Christian education or what I should say. It is bits and pieces'.[3]

Her description has followed me since. Most teachers have an ideal about education being holistic, coherent and authentic, also when religion is concerned. Late modern culture is, however, often perceived as being fragmented, which is a big challenge to education in general and to religious education in particular. This cultural change is reflected in religious education on all levels – kindergarten,[4] school subject, and

1 The article is based on some main points in my book: *Sagberg, Sturla*: Holistic Religious Education – is it possible? The complex web of religion, spirituality and morality, Münster – New York 2015.

2 She used the Norwegian word ‚*ekte*' (like German *echt*), for which I use the equivalent ‚authentic'; cf. *Sagberg, Sturla*: Autentisitet og undring. En drøfting av kristendommens plass i norsk barnehage i institusjonsetisk og personetisk perspektiv [Authenticity and Wonder. A study on the role of Christianity in Norwegian kindergartens from an ethical perspective.] (= KIFO Perspektiv nr. 11), Trondheim 2001.

3 *Sagberg* 2001 [Anm. 2], 99.

4 Pre-school education in Norway does not operate with subjects in a strict sense but the national framework plan describes ‚subject areas' within the contents of pedagogical planning.

research. Cross- or interdisciplinary forms of religious education, including multi-religious approaches, are now found in most European countries.[5] It is also reflected in the corresponding academic discipline of religious education which is informed by many disciplines. This development raises basic questions concerning education, meaning-making, morality and religious faith. *Should religious education rest with a situation of fragmented structures of meaning, or is there in the very subject of religious education some source of holistic meaning across diversity?*

In this essay I use models from contextual theology and Christian ecumenism as a backdrop for understanding views expressed by teachers in the study referred to above. The line of reason continues with a discussion of issues of holism, concluding with suggestions of didactical models.

2. *Searching for holism – an issue of faith and theology*

Wholeness and unity has been a theme of the Christian faith and in Christian theology from the beginning.[6] The lack thereof has taken several forms, from the extremes of religious wars to the recognition of diversity as something that actually support wholeness in a basic sense. The World Council of Churches (WCC) has undertaken several studies on holism as part of ecumenism. A ‚resource book' was published in 2005 based on such studies. In the foreword to the book General Secretary Sam Kobia recognises that ‚there are no easy ways of becoming whole people in whole communities in a whole world,' but ‚holistic education is more a set of values and methodologies that enable individuals and communities to learn in integrated ways that relate to their context'.[7] The way to experienced wholeness is one of integration, which presupposes difference and diversity. Theologically this connects both to the richness of creation and to the concepts of atonement and reconciliation, connecting the individual not only to God but also to fellow human beings.

It is, however, not surprising that theological traditions follow different trajectories concerning this theme. Theology has always been shaped contextually, but this has not always been taken into account when theology has been a tool of those in power, or when religious traditions are taken for granted. Without going deeply into the issue of contextual theology as such I use Stephen Bevans' model of contextual theology as a mirror to understand the paradox of wholeness and diversity (see fig. 1).[8]

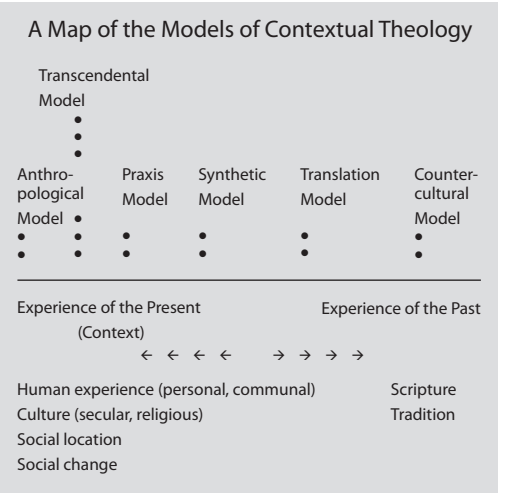

Fig. 1: Models of Contextual Theology

5 *Keast, John* (ed.): Religious diversity and intercultural educaton. A reference book for schools, Strasbourg 2007; *Kuyk, Elza / Jensen, Roger / Schreiner, Peter et al.* (eds.): Religious Education in Europe. Situation and current trends in schools, Oslo 2007.

6 Cf. the prayer of Jesus in the gospel of John, chapter 17.

7 *Schreiner, Peter / Banev, Esther / Oxley, Simon* (eds.): Holistic Education Resource Book. Learning and Teaching in an Ecumenical Context, Münster – New York et al. 2005, 9.

8 *Bevans, Stephen B.*: Models of Contextual Theology. Revised and Expanded Edition, Maryknoll, New York 2002, 32.

Bevans' book, now a classic, is a detailed discussion of the models in figure 1, and the scope of this article allows just a short sketch.

The countercultural model is marked by a *distrust of context* as a source of understanding and interpretation. It is based on a deep conviction of the inherent wisdom in Scripture and normative tradition. The conviction of the wisdom in Scripture and tradition will, hopefully, still be present in the church. However, applying this model alone will hardly serve to create a sense of holism in a public kindergarten in a pluralistic society. *The translation model* takes context into account in terms of language and imagery, trying to pass on the essential content of scripture and tradition. Quite a bit of traditional communication of the Gospel to children and youth follows this thinking. Such circumstances may be statutes and laws that give Christian traditions, stories and festivals a recognised place in a culture. *The synthetic model* is one used by those who attempt to keep all elements in balance – a very difficult task, not knowing when to trust either tradition or contextual interpretations of the Gospel.

The praxis model means communicating the Gospel with an emphasis on what it does in terms of social, moral and cultural improvement. Bevans points out that this model may function adequately within certain sets of circumstances. It understands Christianity based on the visible results of the Gospel applied to social reality. It may also go well with, or actually also presuppose, the translation model. *The anthropological model* is the one that puts most emphasis on present experience and local culture as a source of understanding the Gospel, a lens through which the Gospel becomes meaningful. Feminist theology, indigenous theology and other theologies are often constructed according to this model. Some child theology is understood according to this model, as a kind of liberation theology.[9] It presupposes, however, that the Gospel is preached or imparted verbally, but then re-read in the light of new social and cultural contexts.

Finally, there is *the transcendental model*. Thinking along this model means focusing not on a specific content to be articulated, but on *the subject who is articulating her and his faith*. If you are *authentic* in your faith, you will be able to express your faith in a way that makes sense to others, provoking them to raise questions and, hopefully, develop their own faith and reflection on faith. All models may be used either as closed frameworks or as a starting point, open to and supplemented by other approaches. In any case, searching for holistic religious education today requires being aware of theological diversity and the significance of context in relating to the person and message of Jesus Christ.

The models are developed within a Christian framework. They may, however, function also within another religious framework by analogy, as most religions display diversity.

3. *From theology to religion in kindergarten*

In the study referred to at the beginning of this essay I found views that reflect similar or analogous views on the role and normativity of Christian traditions as those described in contextual theology. The kindergarten teachers expressed attitudes and opinions related to religion and Christianity on one hand and to their own relationship to faith and to education on the other hand. The results were possible to illustrate with a four field matrix, where one continuum pertains to their understanding of religion (*in casu* Christianity) and the other to the ideal of authenticity (see fig. 2).

9 *Sagberg* 2015 [Anm. 1], chapter 3.

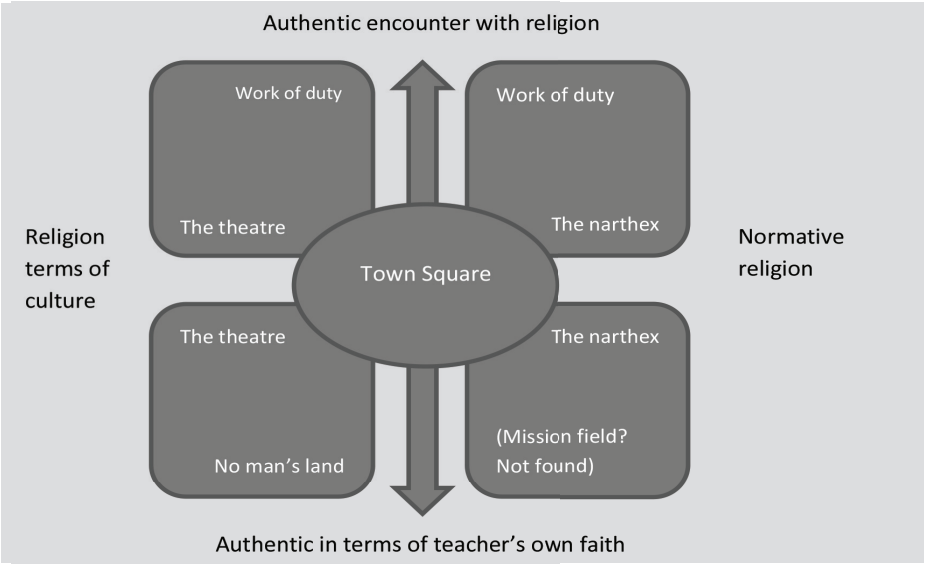

Fig. 2: A Map of Attitudes Towards Religious Traditions in Kindergartens

‚The theatre' denotes an attitude towards religion where religion is interpreted in terms of cultural history, aesthetics and narratives that are parts of a wider cultural identity. In terms of education this means that religious stories, texts, and expressions of art are used along with other cultural expressions without connecting them to specific personal faith.

‚Work of duty' denotes attitudes where teachers may have personal philosophies or beliefs that are perceived as being different from or opposed to the actual subject matter, but they are loyal to their task as teachers without taking their own views into account. The result is most often that children may encounter religious traditions, but rarely with a chance to discuss their more existential significance.

‚The narthex', the hall in front of the sanctuary in a church, denotes an attitude where teachers consider places of worship as an integrated element in public life. Taking part in religious life is not part of education as such, but they will not hide their own faith, and they are willing to talk with children about religious experiences and practices.

‚Religious no-man's land' represents attitudes where teachers consider matters of religion as a non-subject, for various reasons. Usually this has to do with their understanding of religion only in terms of personal faith, which they regard as a matter of private concern only.

‚The town square' is the place where most teachers in my study find themselves. It means they are aware of the presence of church or of other symbols of religion, and it is possible to talk about the meaning of religion without giving it special focus or involving oneself, be it in terms of using religious traditions as cultural resources or of visiting places of worship.

The description in figure 2 is based on a study that goes back to the 1990s. More recent studies indicate that similar positions are found today as well,[10] even when accounting for in-

10 *Johnsen, Elisabeth T.*: Religiøs læring i sosiale praksiser. En etnografisk studie av mediering, identifisering og forhandlingsprosesser i Den norske kirkes trosopplæring (Religious learning in social practices. An ethnographical study of faith education in Church of Norway), Oslo 2014.

creased religious diversity. On the background of these positions the initial questions may be rephrased: *In what way can religion be a subject in holistic education? Is holistic religious education possible and plausible, and if it is, how do the various approaches and traditions serve to support a sense of holism both for the adult and for children?* These questions are general, and there will be different answers depending on cultural context. However, cultural and religious borders are porous today. What happens in one country in Europe affects other countries, and the same or similar basic themes are discussed.

4. *Holistic religious education – is it possible?*

4.1 The meaning of holism

The concept of *holism* is used in many contexts with different ideologies, but basic to all is an attitude or a methodology that emphasises the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts. This may carry several meanings in the context of education and of religious education.

- Holism may refer to a specific religion as a comprehensive view of life. I believe my informant held such an understanding when she claimed that it is impossible to talk about Christianity in terms of ‚wholeness', because society has become both secularised and religiously pluralistic.
- Holism may also refer to a philosophy of life that is presented as an alternative to traditional religions, claiming that there is a spirituality that connects to science and human reason in manners that make religions superfluous. In a paradoxical way ‚holists' still establish ceremonies and rites that resemble those of religions, making it hard to see how this meaning would be much different from the first.
- Holism may refer to the person, meaning that religious education should aim at the whole person. Article 27 of Convention on the Rights of the Child states the ‚right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development'. The instruments of human rights are developed to safeguard the right to believe and to express one's beliefs in a safe society, or in other words, to safeguard plurality.
- Holism may also be an ideal of education in a hermeneutical sense, meaning that the process of education must serve both cognitive and existential needs. In that sense it lies close to a view of the person as a whole being.

My use of the term takes its point of departure in the third and fourth sense, as these connect to the basic meaning of holism, *the importance of the whole* and *the interdependence of its parts*. Holism as a *hermeneutical concept* invites researchers to consider the many parts and aspects connected to religious education to see how they interact and work towards the importance of the subject as such. This aspect of holism is not always taken into account by the proponents of holistic views, and that is why I propose the statement in the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a key to explore holism.

4.2 Eight principles of holistic education

The view of culture as continued creation is a central Christian motif. It is also reflected in the first of eight principles of holistic education expressed by a working group within the World Council of Churches:[11] *Based on a belief in God as creator, holistic education contributes to an ongoing search for restoring the given unity of creation*. The perspective of continued creation can be read as a *caveat* against closed immanent frameworks of education.

11 *Schreiner / Banev / Oxley* 2005 [Anm. 7], I refer to the main points of the principles without quoting them directly.

The second principle identifies holistic education as *education for transformation of persons and communities*. This makes it a countermodel to a mechanistic view, taking account of developments in different areas of science and philosophy where a shift towards holistic thinking has taken place.

The third principle requires education to promote the quest for meaning, taking *the whole person* into consideration. It refers to the dimensions of life mentioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and points to the need to understand how various contexts give meaning to life.

Fourth, *people can learn together from each other's differences, while honouring the uniqueness of persons and communities*. This principle may be the most difficult to follow, navigating between exclusivism and ethnocentrism on one extreme and on the other extreme a watered-down pluralism, where the concept of truth is no longer explored or taken seriously.

Fifth, holistic education enables *active participation in a world community*, searching for what is most universally human in all cultures. Religion used in power play on macro and micro levels requires careful analysis and ethical criticism, and the search for the universally human, for altruism and for goodness, presents itself as increasingly urgent in our time.

Sixth, *holistic education affirms spirituality as being the core of life and therefore central to education*. This is affirmed in the extensive contributions from the so called Children's Spirituality Movement.[12] So far, the notion of children's spirituality has, however, not had a breakthrough in Nordic education.

The seventh principle requires education to *promote a praxis of knowing, teaching and learning as a mutually accountable process*. This principle recognises the need to develop a methodology of holistic education, and the handbook these principles refer to is an attempt towards such a methodology. The principle leads to regarding teaching as a calling and as an expression of artistic sensitivity and scientifically grounded practice.

The eighth principle seems to sum up the purpose of holistic education, stating that holistic education *relates to differing perspectives that raise fundamental questions about us as human beings brought together*. In my opinion, recognising the child as a spiritual, religious and moral subject in a human fellowship reflects this eighth principle in particular (connecting it to the sixth principle). The notion of spirituality has expanded the conceptions of religion defined by confessions or specific religious cultures. It raises fundamental questions about what it is to be human in a moral sense and about the sources of meaning and hope.

These eight principles are stated with a basis in a Christian, theological anthropology and educational theories from humanist traditions that are compatible with Christian theology. This does not mean that they could not have been developed from another religious perspective, but my discussion takes place in a cultural context where Christianity is a major force. Holism means that the teacher must navigate without falling into the pits of absolutism and relativism. That makes religious education an art. It is a holistic enterprise, but we understand the whole in bits and pieces. That is why the attitude of *wonder* is so important for true education.[13]

12 E. g. *De Souza, Marian / Francis, Leslie J. / O'Higgins-Norman, James et al.* (eds.): International Handbook of Education for Spirituality, Care and Wellbeing, Dordrecht 2009; *Hay, David / Nye, Rebecca*: The Spirit of the Child, London 2006.

13 *Sagberg, Sturla*: Wonder and the Question of Truth in Religious Education. In: Sewanee Theological Review 48 (2005) 4; *Ders.*: Teachers' lives as wonder journeys. Ethical reflections on spirituality in education. In: *Tirri, Kirsi* (ed.): Nordic Perspectives on Religion, Spirituality and Identity. Yearbook 2006 of the Department of Practical Theology, Helsinki 2006.

4.3 Holism, spirituality and hope

The sixth principle points to spirituality as a core concept in holistic education. The notion of spirituality has been largely neglected in Norwegian educational policy. Studies from England indicate a similar neglect. The Children Act 2004 and the programme called *Every Child Matters* describe Children's well-being in five domains, but without mentioning the right to spiritual development. That is to say, values mentioned in the policy documents may be equated with children's spirituality, but as the British educationalist Jacqueline Watson points out, the richness of what can be meant by spirituality in terms of transcendent beliefs and values of existential meaning is marginalised.[14]

Jack Priestley, also British educationalist, points to the development of the Education Acts in England (1918, 1944 and 1988) that have kept a notion of the spiritual linked to civilisation and character.[15] Following this line of thought, I will claim that a holistic religious education connects *knowledge about religion with spirituality, meaning and hope*. Vaclav Havel has expressed the significance of meaning and hope in a striking way in an interview a few years before the Velvet Revolution: ‚We either have hope in us or not; it is the dimension of our soul and does not depend on any observations of the world or judgments of the situation [...]. It is not a conviction that everything will be all right, but a conviction that something has meaning, regardless of what happens'.[16]

Vaclav's point connects religious and non-religious points of view. Applied to education, it means that different traditions and disciplines must relate to the same point of orientation, namely, children' search for meaning and the possibility of entering the future hoping that somehow the world is not only a loose collection of fragments.

5. *Religious education in the town square, in the narthex or as a pilgrimage?*

I have referred to a typology of attitudes to religion in early childhood education, of which I called one ‚the narthex'. This position is perceived as not entering the sanctuary, but of being aware of it, and thus creating an atmosphere where it is possible to talk about the meaning of faith and of religion. On the other side of the continuum I found attitudes that regarded religion as part of culture history, thus creating the typos of ‚theatre'. The theatre provides a backdrop for supporting children's process of self-understanding and meaning-making. In the middle of the continuum I found attitudes that I connected to the metaphor of ‚town square': It is an open arena, free to explore both the theatre and the holy place, for some a difficult position because it requires one to make some choice of where to go, and for others a position full of promise of a holistic education because they dare to explore.

The complexity of religious education is partly due to the erosion of one overarching framework of understanding, and there is no way to re-establish such a framework in a modern democracy. It is therefore both a paradox

14 *Watson, Jacqueline*: Every Child Matters and children's spiritual rights. Does the new holistic approach to children's care address children's spiritual well-being? In: International Journal of Children's Spirituality 11(2006).

15 *Priestley, Jack*: The Spiritual Dimension of the Curriculum. What are school inspectors looking for and how can we help them find it? In: *Ota, Cathy/ Erricker, Clive* (eds.): Spiritual Education. Literary, Empirical and Pedagogical Approaches, Brighton, Portland 2005.

16 *Havel, Václav*: Fjernforhør (Distant interrogations). Samtale med Karel Hvízdala 1985–1986, Oslo 1989, 153f.

and a challenge in the fact that old metaphors have proved their power in the task of making meaning, metaphors that are used in religious education as well. The town square has been made into more of a meeting place than it has been for a long time, and even kindergartens are now modelled after the open society where children can interact openly with other children and adults. The modern town square resembles more the medieval town square, where there is access to several institutions from the same arena: the city hall, the market, and the church – or the churches, synagogues, temples and mosques. Religious education modelled after the town square, however, hardly provides a sense of holistic learning without further support or actual entry into the holy places and discussion of how these different arenas interact.

In my research, the narthex, used as metaphor, corresponds with teachers who try to enable children to talk freely about the meaning of faith without actually making them enter the sanctuary, yet showing them there are places of worship and traditions that are sources of meaning for many people. Professor Bert Roebben of Dortmund University has made an attempt to redefine religious education in terms of ‚narthical religious learning'.[17] He claims that religious education should aim towards more than ‚religious tourism' (learning about religion). Against the background of ‚individualisation, pluralisation and detraditionalisation of religion', which is the context of most young people today, he presents an argument for a ‚hermeneutic-communicative approach' to religious education. In concrete terms it implies encounter with lived religion, traditions, symbols and rituals – viewed from ‚the narthex'. Roebben adds to this metaphor the image of a pilgrimage. In today's world the pilgrimage has become both a metaphor of late modern life and an actual learning experience for many.

The pilgrim motif is present in research on children's spirituality as well as in philosophy with children.[18] The image of education as a pilgrimage is found in most religions, but usually not with reference to children. If life as such is understood as a pilgrimage, children are absolutely pilgrims, only just starting on their journey.[19] It may be not only one example of religious culture, but a model of religious education as such, and in this last part of the paper I present some characteristics of the pilgrim that may also be integrated in education.

- The pilgrims actually walk, or in any case move (if they are not able to walk). It is a physical journey as well as a spiritual journey.
- A pilgrim is recognised as a person on a mission, entitled to some protection and rights along the pilgrim routes.
- Being on a pilgrimage makes all people equal. There is no division between young or old, rich or poor.
- Literally, a pilgrim is a foreigner (from Latin *peregrinus*), meaning that pilgrims have their real homeland somewhere else than where they are making their journey. The very concept of pilgrim is thus connected to a spiritual worldview. Travelling through this world of ours has points of encounter with a greater reality.
- A pilgrim is, accordingly, at home everywhere while also being a foreigner. Being a pilgrim

17 *Roebben, Bert*: Narthical religious learning: Redefining religious education in terms of pilgrimage, British Journal of Religious Education 31 (2009) 1.

18 *Champagne, Elaine*: Å leve og å dø. Et vindu mot (kristne) barns spiritualitet (Living and dying: A window to [Christian] children's spirituality). In: *Sagberg, Sturla* (ed.): Barnet i trosopplæringen. Pedagogiske og teologiske refleksjoner over barneteologi, spiritualitet og livssyn, Oslo 2008; *Coles, Robert*: The Spiritual Life of Children, Boston 1990; *Olsholt, Øyvind*: Filosofiske samtaler i Den norske kirke (Philosophy with children in Church of Norway). Rapport fra prosjektet ‚På vandring gjennom livet', Barne- og ungdomsfilosofene, Eidsvoll 2009.

19 *Coles* 1990 [Anm. 18], 335.

is not fleeing from this world, but wandering through it, sensing it, living it, while connecting physical life to a greater reality.

- In terms of education, the pilgrimage is education as such. Etymologically, the term stems from Latin *educo*, meaning ‚I lead forth, I take out; I raise up, I erect'. Education is the process of leading a person out into life and raising her up morally, cognitively, spiritually and emotionally. To envisage a learner in terms of a pilgrim means respecting the learner as a responsible subject and partner in a fellowship.
- The goal of a pilgrimage is in many ways an enigma. It may be a specific place, like Trondheim, Santiago di Compostela, Mecca or Jerusalem. Arriving at a destination seems, however, to carry some meaning beyond being the end of a journey or a sacred place. In Norway going on a pilgrimage to Trondheim has been part of confirmation preparation, part of kindergarten education, and also rehabilitation of prison inmates.
- The goal may not even be a physical destination, but arriving at peace with oneself and the world. The pilgrimage itself is part of the goal.
- Finally, being on a pilgrimage can be understood in terms of religion, philosophy or education. For all, a pilgrimage involves expectation or hope, an act of breaking up or beginning a journey, the actual wandering, and an experience of coming to a goal or a destination, or of entering an ongoing process of change.

6. Concluding remarks

To make religious education into holistic education requires an orientation of practice, teaching and research towards the way one looks at the world as creation, on humans as relational and responsible beings, on learning as a holistic process, and – from a Christian viewpoint – on how Christianity can be of service to all humanity in dialogue with other faiths. Holistic religious education will most probably always represent a counter-culture – but that may also apply to education in general if it serves its formative function.

I referred to the teacher whose ideal was that ‚the whole thing should be authentic to the children', being aware of the fact that in terms of religion children get ‚bits and pieces' rather than wholeness. I would claim that bits and pieces are all right if the teacher is aware of it and stimulates children's search for wholeness. A piece may reflect wholeness. Theologically speaking, there is no complete wholeness to be found on earth, but we can still connect to the whole world and to an ultimate sense of wholeness. Holistic religious education may be possible, but it is more a matter of direction and orientation than of claiming to have found some totality. The art of religious education depends on being aware of its limitations as well as its orientation. That is why I find the metaphor of the pilgrim so useful. The art of religious education is the art of exploring the most important questions of life on a journey together with young co-travellers.

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