

Criticism of Religion and Talking about God in Religious Education

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This lecture reflects on the extent to which people today are influenced by religion; gives information about the history and different forms of criticism of religion and considers ways of dealing with this challenge in the context of religious education

1. How religious are people today?

Today's pluralist society is characterized by a variety of beliefs and ideologies. Whereas for some people, talking about God is something which is quite natural, it is highly disputed or even strange to others. Apart from this general and highly uncontroversial observation, are we able to make any more specific statement about how religious the peoples of Europe are? In the past, people have attempted to answer this question by referring to congregational or denominational affiliations. That would mean the following for the situation in Germany: Almost two-thirds of the population are members of a Christian church.¹ However, knowledge about church membership obviously does not answer all the questions about people's beliefs.

Hence, the next step was to ask the question "Do you believe that God exists?". In an opinion poll in 1992, 56 % of over-18-year-olds in the former West Germany and 27 % in the former East Germany responded in the affirmative to the sentence: "I believe that God exists."² Even this is still a somewhat crude manner of understanding religion. There are many more aspects to religion than the ideological one. The design of a survey, therefore, has to be more sophisticated.

A recent study meets these requirements and provides us with new insights about religious attitudes. It is the "Religion Monitor 2008" launched by the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Foundation), a quantitative survey carried out in 2007, in which 21,000 adults aged 18 and over from every continent and numerous world religions were representatively polled as a

¹ Cf. EKD (Kirchenamt Hg.), Kirche der Freiheit. Perspektiven für die Evangelische Kirche im 21. Jahrhundert, Hannover 2006, 16f.

² Der SPIEGEL Nr. 25 (1992), 44. N= 3.000 (2.000 West, 1.000 East). Other items to be chosen are: "I do not believe that God exists" and "I do not know if God exists".

percentage of the overall population. 21 countries took part. The Religion Monitor is based on a conception of religion which includes various forms of religiosity: belief in one God or in many gods as well as types of faith which represent a more individualized expression of spirituality. It regards the entire spectrum of religious faith and religious experience independently of any denomination or even affiliation with a religious building.

The study focuses not only on one dimension like its precursors, but on six (core) dimensions of religiousness: interest in religious matters; belief in God or in a divine being; public and private religious practices; religious experiences; and the relevance of religion to everyday life.

The following questions were used to survey the “centrality of religiosity”:

1. Intellect: How often do you think about religious issues?
2. Ideology (belief): How strongly do you believe, that God or a divine entity exists?
3. Public practice: How often do you attend Church service /congregational prayer/ religious rituals?
4. Private practice: How often do you pray or meditate?
5. Personal experience: How often do you experience situations, where you have the feeling that God or a divine entity interferes into your life/ How often do you experience situations, where you have the feeling of being at one?³

Two results are of particular interest. First, the study “Religion Monitor” surveyed seven European countries (Germany, Italy, Austria, Spain, Poland, France, Great Britain and Switzerland) and found out that three-fourths (74 %) of the Europeans are religious, and of that number, one-fourth (25 %) are highly religious; one-fourth of Europeans (23 %) are non-religious. The data for Germany is similar: 70% are religious. Of that number, 18% are highly religious and 28% are non-religious. ⁴

For the "highly-religious" people, religious matters play a central role in their personality; the "religious" are at least "open" to religious matters and patterns of interpretation, whilst

³ The answers are encoded by numbers in the range between 1 and 5 (1 = never / not at all; 2 = seldom / little; 3 = sometimes / moderately; 4 = often / considerably; 5 = very often / very much). “Non-religious” is within the range of 1 to 10 points, “highly religious” spans 20 to 25 points.

⁴ S. Huber, Aufbau und strukturierende Prinzipien des Religionsmonitors, in: Bertelsmann Stiftung (Hg.), Religionsmonitor 2008, Gütersloh 2007, 27. Results for Germany: Centrality index of religiousness.

religious matters, practices and experiences hardly feature at all in the lives of the "non-religious".

The study concludes: "Europe continues to be shaped by Christianity." And: "These people actually live their faith."⁵ We move on to a second extremely interesting conclusion. Let's see how answers differ as a result of the religious dimensions involved. We look at the intensity of the ideological dimension (Germany). The questions were: "How strongly do you believe that God or a divine entity exists?"; "How strongly do you believe that there is life after death (e.g. immortality of the soul, resurrection of the dead, reincarnation)?"

	Showing low intensity	Showing moderate intensity	Showing high intensity
All	36	26	34
Catholic	22	27	50
Protestant	32	31	32
No confession	70	22	7

Note that only one third of the Protestants believe in the existence of God with a high intensity (whereas 50% of the Catholics do). 70% of the people attached to no confession do not agree with the idea that God exists.

Now let's compare these results with those related to the intellectual dimension.

The questions asked in this field are:

1. How often do you think about religious issues?
2. How strongly are you interested in learning more about religious issues

	Showing low intensity	Showing moderate intensity	Showing high intensity
All	33	49	17
Catholic	25	51	23

⁵ Religion Monitor 2008 Europe, Overview of religious attitudes and practices, 21. Download: http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xchg/SID-EA7C303F-EBB13B17/bst/hs.xsl/85217_85220.htm (08.05.2008). According to the surveys conducted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, two-thirds (68 percent) of Europeans today believe in a God or a divine entity, as well as in some form of life after death. More than one-half (57 percent) also report that they attend church services more or less regularly. Sixty-one percent find personal prayer to be meaningful for their daily lives. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) regularly engage in intellectual contemplation of issues relating to religion and faith.

Protestant	29	58	12
No confession	56	38	7

We now see that only 56% of the people with no confession show no interest in religious issues, while 7% show high interest, which is not too dissimilar from the percentage of protestants who want to know very much more about religious issues (12%). It makes sense to differentiate between the ideological and intellectual dimensions: there are more people who are responsive to religious matters than there are who term themselves “believers”. That situation will be of further interest.

Condensing the results of the survey, we can point out that talking about God makes sense to almost two-thirds of the German population and to almost three-fourths of Europeans. One-third of the people surveyed, however, have little or no use for it. This leads us to the phenomenon of criticism of religion.

2. Criticism of religion in antiquity

For as long as religion has existed, it has been criticized. It appears, on the one hand, as criticism coming from within. Its purpose is to overcome deficiencies and to improve religion. A classic example is the Old Testament’s prophets with their criticism of a faith which abandoned its moral roots, such as we find in Amos 5, 21–24: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them [...]. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (NRSV).

In line with this prophetic tradition, we have Martin Luther who criticized the medieval sale of indulgences by the Roman Catholic Church and thereby started the Reformation of the church.

On the other hand we encounter criticism coming from outside religion. As early as in Ancient Greece we find astute and categorical criticism, for example in the works of Xenophanes of Colophon (570–475 BC). He attacks the anthropomorphic descriptions of the gods as he observes them in the works of Homer and other writers: “Humans suppose that

gods have been born and wear clothes like theirs and have voice and body”.⁶ His analysis is that the image of the gods is relative to the region and the culture which is expressed: “Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, and Thracians that theirs have blue eyes and red hair.”⁷ He adds mockingly: “But if horses [...] had hands to draw with their hands and produce works of art as men do, horses would draw the figures of gods like horses”.⁸ Here we see an idea that we shall encounter again.

3. Criticism of religion in modern times

Let’s move on from the ancient world to the modern one. The modern age is shaped by no other idea as deeply as by the concept of enlightenment. Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. “Have courage to use your own understanding!”, Immanuel Kant declared in 1784 . He applied this to every situation in life in which man faced an authority, even a religious one. “The pastor says, ‘Do not argue, believe!’”⁹ Kant would not accept this limitation of freedom. Man should think autonomously and not leave thinking to the authorities. His critique of the church included criticism of its theology. Attempts to “prove” the existence of God were questioned by Kant. He rejected medieval proofs for the existence of God. God can never be a postulate of theoretical reason, because God is not subject to space or time. Man can only perceive what is within space and time. Naturally, one cannot deny God’s existence, for the same reason. Kant rejected religious and church practices such as prayer or service and criticized them as “fetish-service” or “delusion”.¹⁰ He only accepted “natural religion”, which is represented as that which can be understood by using reason and which leads man to acknowledge his moral duty.

Kant’s most radical successor was Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872). His critique of religion is so essential that we should look at it in detail. God is the quintessence of all that man attributes to himself and what he wishes to be. The sum of these ideals is represented in

⁶ Xenophanes, Fragment 28, in: Die Vorsokratiker. Griechisch/Deutsch, Auswahl der Fragmente, Übersetzung und Erläuterung von J. Mansfeld, Stuttgart 1987, 223. English version see <http://www.philosophy.gr/presocratics/xenophanes.htm> (16.03.2010).

⁷ Xenophanes, Fragment 27 (1987, 223).

⁸ Xenophanes, Fragment 29 (1987, 223).

⁹ I. Kant, Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung? in: Immanuel Kant Werke, hg. v. W. Weischedel, Frankfurt a. M. 1977, Bd. 11, 55. Engl. Version: <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/kant.html> (16.03.2010).

¹⁰ I. Kant, Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft [1793], mit einer Einleitung und Anmerkungen hg. v. B. Stangneth, Hamburg 2003, 226 and 262f.

such a manner as if a being with those attributes existed: that is, God. “Man created God in his own image”¹¹, Feuerbach says in his famous Heidelberg “Lectures on the Essence of Religion” in 1848. This was adopted in the history of philosophy as the concept of “projection”. However, Feuerbach never used it.¹² He underlined, on the contrary, that human desires cause God to exist. “Projection” however, would mean there already is something to project ideas on (like a screen). Man “believes in a perfect being, because he himself wishes to be perfect; he believes in an immortal being, because he himself wishes not to die. What he is not, but wishes to be, he represents in his Gods as existing [...]. The Gods are the human wishes turned into real beings.”¹³

Feuerbach summons man to appropriate goodness for himself and to construct a better world. The purpose of his lectures is “to transform friends of God into friends of man, believers into thinkers, devotees of prayer into devotees of work, candidates for the hereafter into students of this world, Christians into *men*, into *whole men*”.¹⁴ With this insight in the spirit of enlightenment, Feuerbach made his contribution to the 19th century’s revolution. From now on it will be possible to overcome the divorce of man from himself. If there is no longer an almighty, holy God, there is no need for powerless, unworthy man as opponent either. Man can easily see that knowledge, power, dignity and happiness are grounded in the essence of mankind. Anybody who wants to provide a better life, “must replace the love of God by the love of man as the only true religion, the belief in God by the belief in man and his powers”.¹⁵

As we see, Feuerbach’s critique emerged from the unprogressive political and social attitude of the 19th century church and had an explicit political orientation towards revolution. He could not imagine a religion which was in favor of revolution.

In summing up the essential arguments, we can say the following: Religion needs criticism from within, as we have seen in the cases of the prophets and Martin Luther; and religion needs criticism coming outside, as with Feuerbach.

¹¹ L. Feuerbach, *Vorlesungen über das Wesen der Religion. Nebst Zusätzen und Anmerkungen*, 3., gegenüber der 2., durchges., unveränd. Auflage, in: ders., *Gesammelte Werke*, hg. v. W. Schuffenhauer, Berlin 1984, Bd. 6, 20. Vorlesung, 212.

¹² The notion of “projection” even occurs in TRE, cf. G. Wenz, *Art. Religionskritik I*, in: TRE 28, Berlin et. al. 1997, 687-693, here 690.

¹³ Feuerbach 1984, 22. Vorlesung 224.

¹⁴ Feuerbach 1984, 3. Vorlesung 30f.; 30. Vorlesung 320.

¹⁵ Feuerbach 1984, 30. Vorlesung 319.

Criticisms of religion cannot be completely refuted. On the contrary, we can embrace certain aspects of them: for example, we can be aware of the temptation to shape God in the image of our expectations and desires; or we can be prepared to question our concept of God repeatedly, and let it go.

Certainly, we are not able to overpower Feuerbach by rational arguments, simply because he made a decision to perceive the world as he did, in the same way as we make a decision every day when we confess: "I believe".

Before we examine atheism today, we have to consider a further type of criticism of religion. Here, we are talking about empiricism, positivism and analytic philosophy. Positivism, which is often connected with empiricism,¹⁶ emerged in the 19th century. It holds that the only authentic knowledge is that which is based on sense experience and positive verification. Everything we know, we experience. What we experience, we do by our senses. It is a countermovement to speculative philosophy and theology.¹⁷ Even in the 19th century, positivism became superior to religion – at least in Europe – and took over the prerogative of interpretation in wide areas of our society. Religion is perceived as a phenomenon belonging to an older stage of human history, overcome by the stage of positivism, the stage of science, as Auguste Comte (1798–1857) put it in his work "Cours de philosophie positive". Sometimes however, it seems that faith in science and progress have caused science to become a new kind of religion.¹⁸

Positivism was modified in the early 20th century by analytic philosophy. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) said: Only assertions that we can verify make sense. A sentence such as "God is here" cannot be verified because we cannot prove God's existence by empirical means. Hence this sentence is senseless.¹⁹ According to Wittgenstein, philosophy's task is to clarify things. "Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly." (4.116). Metaphysical talking is to be discarded, because it is not clear and unspeakable. "The limits of the language mean the limits of my world." (5.62). Not just the answers, but even the metaphysical questions themselves

¹⁶ Derives from the Greek word "empeiria" (experience, knowledge), cf. W. C. Zimmerli, Art. Empirismus, in: EKL Bd. 1, Göttingen 1986, 1025-1029.

¹⁷ Cf. F. Wallner, Positivismus, in: EKL Bd. 3, Göttingen 1992, 1273.

¹⁸ Cf. Wallner 1273.

¹⁹ Cf. L. Wittgenstein, Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung, Frankfurt a. M. 1963, 4.003: "Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but senseless." English translation see <http://www.kfs.org/~jonathan/witt/tlph.html> (08.05.2010).

are senseless. The famous ending of the “Tractatus logico-philosophicus” (1921) is: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” (7). Wittgenstein concedes, however: “There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.” (6.522)

For discussion:

1. The sentence: “The only propositions which are true are those which can be proved empirically”, cannot be proved empirically itself. It is a postulate. When it comes to positivism having to justify itself, it cannot do it by empirical survey. It has to refer to an ultimate justification, possibly by metaphysical ways.
2. There is an important argument against the idea that the empirical method and logic are the all-determining reality and there would not be any other reality without them. Wittgenstein himself formulated it, when he stated that science cannot respond to questions of life: “We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched.” (6.52).²⁰
3. Against the tendency of putting too much emphasis on the dominion of logic, we can point out: Christian faith is not a heavenly science, but an earthly way of behavior and of life. He who tries to live as Jesus did, believes in God, even when he does not express it. Anyone who does not act this way, does not believe in God, even when he claims that he does (cf. Mt 25:31–46).
4. Analytic philosophy calls our attention to problems within theology: How much can be achieved by our use of semantic clarity? Do we talk about God coherently or do we use contradictory statements like: “God is the creator of evil” and simultaneously: “God is not the creator of evil”?
5. When we consider theological utterances, we have to meet the requirements of logic as far as possible, because we want to be understood – especially in state schools. We have to be particular that we do not refer unthinkingly to empty phrases such as: “Contradictions have to be borne with faith.”

4. New Atheism Movement

²⁰ Wittgenstein 1963, 6.52.

Let's move on to the 21st century. We face a new phenomenon known as the New Atheism Movement. The idea was postulated in 2006 by Gary Wolf, a US American, executive producer of the internet portal "wired.com". In his article "Battle of the New Atheism" he writes:

"This is the challenge posed by the New Atheists. We are called upon, we lax agnostics, we noncommittal nonbelievers, we vague deists [...]; we are called out, we fence-sitters, and told to help exorcise this debilitating curse: the curse of faith. The New Atheists will not let us off the hook simply because we are not doctrinaire believers. They condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong; it's evil. Now that the battle has been joined, there's no excuse for shirking."²¹ The statement that new atheism not only refutes religion but also refutes respect for religion is extremely important. It is a very *aggressive* attitude. It is no longer content with uttering doubts. The mission is to fight religion and the status it has achieved in society.

Wolf names as one of the leaders of the movement Richard Dawkins, who became famous with his recent book "The God Delusion". In it, he tries to convert his readers to atheism and he is convinced that he can "disprove" God's existence.²² In his contempt for believers, he is in line with Sam Harris, another exponent of new atheism. Harris characterizes believers in general as "maniacs" (because of their fondness for sacrifices).²³

5. New atheism and education

Because of its missionary drive, new atheism wants to gain influence in the field of education. It wants to "enlighten" children; in other words, to tell them the true nature of religion. In 2007, a children's book (designed for children aged 6-8) was published in Germany with the title: "Which is The Way to God, Please? Little Piglet asked: A book for all those who won't let themselves be fooled" The piglet book is perceived by the general public as a sign of the new atheism. The author's homepage advertises the book as "Dawkins for children".

²¹ G. Wolf, Battle of the New Atheism, <http://www.wired.com/news/wiredmag/0,71985-0.html?tw=rss.index>, see <http://richarddawkins.net/articles/228> (retrieved 16.03.2010).

²² "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down." R. Dawkins, The God Delusion, London 2007, 28.

²³ http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/sam_harris/2007/08/the_sacrifice_of_reason.html (retrieved 16.03.2010)

What is the book about? It tells the story of a piglet and a hedgehog, who one day find a poster on the wall of their house, saying: "He who knows not God, is missing something." So they decide to go and look for God. They climb up a mountain where they encounter a rabbi, a catholic bishop and a mufti in their sacred buildings. However, the encounters end in a riot. The representatives reveal themselves as resentful and incapable of any dialogue. The piglet and hedgehog drive them wild with their naive and provoking questions and their inappropriate behavior in the sacred buildings: for example the piglet eats consecrated hosts because it is hungry. The rabbi, the bishop and the mufti accuse them of being "goddamned non-believers" and "possessed by the devil" and try to catch them. Unfortunately, they start a fight between themselves and they throw their holy scriptures at each other's heads. During the scuffle, piglet and hedgehog manage to escape. They realize that they do not need religion at all. Religion causes fear which is an emotion that the animals did not miss or even did not know before. The book ends with the conclusion that the religious people from the mountain are crazy. Religion is "bad magic, just a joke".

What can we say about this from the point of view of religious education? Criticism of religion is acceptable, including the statement that religion can cause fear (which we cannot dispute). However, it is aggravating that the book resorts to distorting religion in such a way that it is no longer a serious portrayal. There is no interest in showing what religion aims to be. The features of the three religions are torn from their contexts. For example, Christians are charged with being "cannibals" because of the Eucharist. Religious people cannot respond to reasonable questions (such as, "Is God not just a fantasy?"): they are stupid because they believe in stories such the Great Flood, they wear "funny" clothes and their buildings smell "weird".

The book deliberately mixes up the fictional dimension of the animals with the real dimension of the religion. The Jewish religion appears offensive just because the piglet is not to be allowed to enter the synagogue (pigs are impure). This does not appear to be accidental. It is the author's purpose. The message behind it all is this: Real encounter with religion is impossible.

From an educational viewpoint, the book does not fulfill its own aspiration of making room for free thinking. The book does not want the young reader to develop their own powers of judgement. Instead, he or she should accept the author's prejudice. Religion is not deserving of interest, let alone respect. The appropriate attitude is to laugh at religious people.

Turning away from this poor piece of workmanship, we conclude:

1. Religious education has the fundamental task of presenting religion in such a way that it will be understood by school students according to its selfconception.
2. Religious education must acknowledge atheism as a reality and a challenge. This leads us to our final section:

6. Religious education and atheism

Teenagers did not take part in the “Religion Monitor” survey. But they were invited to participate in a follow-up survey online. 7000 Germans aged 14 to 21 answered the questionnaire.

Centrality of religion

Germany	Religious	Highly religious	Total
Catholic 14-17	41	25	66
Catholic 18-21	36	33	69
Protestant 14-17	39	17	56
Protestant 18-21	34	26	60

Ideological Dimension: How strongly do you believe, that God or a divine entity exists

Germany	Showing moderate intensity	Showing high intensity	Total
Catholic 14-17	40	41	81
Catholic 18-21	27	50	77
Protestant 14-17	40	35	75
Protestant 18-21	31	42	73

As we see, Christian teens are not significantly less religious than the adult Christian population. The survey states further that among Catholics, Protestants and those of no confession aged 18-21, there is significantly greater interest in religious issues than among the

14-17 years-old.²⁴ The report does not state anything about the population of young people as a whole. So we must make recourse to the Shell survey “Youth 2006”. Among teens and adults between 12 and 25 years of age, 30 % believe in a “personal God” und a further 19 % in a “transcendental power”.²⁵ And what about younger children? Here I refer to a survey from the “Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach” which was carried out in Germany in 2003. Almost three-fourths of 800 children surveyed between the ages of 6 and 12 declared that they believed in God. We differentiate between the former West Germany (82 %) and the former East Germany (27 %).²⁶

How can we explain these results? We find a certain amount of agreement between them and the popular theories of religious development (by Fowler, Oser/Gmünder) which state that (childhood) faith and talking about God is questioned as age increases and as children mature as autonomous individuals.²⁷ The noticeable gap between the former East and West Germanys can be explained by the systematic obstruction of religion by the state and its authorities (including the Stasi) during the time of the GDR. It managed to have a pervasive effect even in the sphere of family life. Considering the importance of the family in passing on religious traditions, we may imagine the extent of the damage.²⁸

Now, how can we deal with criticism of religion when it is uttered in a lesson of religious education? Let me introduce to you Petra, 11th grade. She answers the question, who or what is God for herself: “God is a human idea. I do believe only in one, and that is me.”²⁹ Criticism of religion such as we encounter in Feuerbach can be formulated by school students. Hence, the issue must have its place in religious education. But there is still more to say: If it is accurate from a theological perspective to state that religion needs criticism (as I demonstrated above), we must not avoid it in religious education.

²⁴ http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xchg/SID-47166D84-1E24E1F1/bst/hs.xsl/nachrichten_99224.htm (10.3.2010).

²⁵ T. Gensicke, Jugend und Religiosität, in: Jugend 2006. Eine pragmatische Generation unter Druck, v. K. Hurrelmann/M. Albert (15. Shell-Jugendstudie), Frankfurt a. M. 2006, 208.

²⁶ N = 819, cf. G. Hilger/W. Ritter, Religionsdidaktik Grundschule. Handbuch für die Praxis des evangelischen und katholischen Religionsunterrichts, München/Stuttgart 2006, 167.

²⁷ Cf. K.E. Nipkow, Erwachsenwerden ohne Gott? Gotteserfahrung im Lebenslauf, 3. Aufl. München 1990.

²⁸ Cf. U. Schwab, Familienreligiosität. Religiöse Traditionen im Prozess der Generationen, Stuttgart 1995.

²⁹ H. G. Ziebertz et. al., Religiöse Signaturen heute. Ein religionspädagogischer Beitrag zur empirischen Jugendforschung, Gütersloh/Freiburg 2003, 325.

When we consider religious education, we look at the didactical triangle. It is composed of the teacher, students and the religious subject or issue. Let's have a look at the teacher. For teachers of religious lessons it is a duty - more than that, it is a step towards increasing their own teaching competence - to realize that there is no need to be afraid of raising critical questions with students. On the contrary, avoiding or suppressing expression of religious criticism is problematic from both a theological and a didactical point of view. A Catholic colleague of mine states: "Until now we have found in religious education in elementary school [...] a style of teaching which was supposed to be suitable for children. But it underestimates the children, keeping back the full truth from them. Later, this will very easily cause students to regard religion as 'kids' stuff' in a negative way."³⁰ I put it positively: If our goal of religious education is that pupils learn "to be able to live a Christian life",³¹ it is implied that pupils know how to respond to the challenge posed by criticism of religion and that they are able to make a reasoned and personal decision.

We encountered another form of criticism of religion, *Positivism and Empirism*. These are an enduring issue for religion. We may rest assured that they emerge in religious education classes from the mouths of students. I refer to the utterance of 11th grade Thomas who stated in a research interview on religion: "I already said that I only believe in what I see ...".³²

It is a fruitless endeavor to fight attitudes like these or to try to make students look ridiculous in front of the others. Positivism and Empirism belong to our very culture in Europe. Who would seriously want to discredit the positive consequences of Empirism? Religious education, however, can and should try to offer a complementary view and to introduce a reality that one cannot see, that nevertheless is of great personal importance.³³

In considering the challenges brought up by analytic philosophy, we can say something similar. Christian talk about God should be as comprehensible as possible and without contradiction. It is obvious enough that in talking about God, we sooner or later reach a point where this is impossible. In religious education classes, we are allowed, together with the students, to identify and name those limits. At the same time students should become

³⁰ R. Oberthür, *Kinder und die großen Fragen. Ein Praxisbuch für den Religionsunterricht*, München 1995, 11.

³¹ C. Grethlein/C.Lück, *Religion in der Grundschule. Ein Kompendium*, Göttingen 2006, 120.

³² Ziebertz 2003, 239.

³³ Cf. A.-K. Szagun, *Phantasie Reisen*, in: G. Adam/R. Lachmann (Hg.), *Methodisches Kompendium, Göttingen für den Religionsunterricht 2. Aufbaukurs*, Göttingen 2002, 244-258.

familiar with creative ways of dealing with this experience. In this context, Wittgenstein's saying, "What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" can encourage us to seek new and fundamental experiences in the exercise of silence and meditation.³⁴

I will finish my lecture with a look at the practical work of religious education. Where does the criticism of religion fit in? When we consider the theological development of pupils, we have to differentiate between primary and secondary school. In secondary school, teenagers of 15 and over, in the 10th grade, are able to approach and understand the fundamental motives of atheism. It makes perfect sense to introduce them directly to the epistemological tension between faith and modern thinking as well as to the dispute of different concepts of truth. This could be brought about by looking at the works of Feuerbach or representatives of analytic philosophy. The curriculum of the Bavarian Gymnasium, for example, is in line with this conception and Feuerbach is supposed to be studied in the 11th grade.³⁵

How about primary school? Children aged 6 to 10, because of the stage of their cognitive development, lack the ability to identify faith and empiricism as different epistemological concepts and contrapose them. They should be introduced to criticism of religion in an indirect manner. This can be done by reading important biblical texts and encouraging an open dialogue with the pupils. This path is embedded in the master concept of "theologizing with children".³⁶ Here is an example of my own research with groups of children in the 4th grade:

I read a simplified version of Gen 1 along with the pupils. Then they were asked to write down three questions they had concerning the text. In the following lessons the children had the chance to discuss their own questions exhaustively without me interfering by giving any theological interpretation. My role was confined to moderating the children's conversation.

Some of the questions raised by the children were:

³⁴ Cf. W. Nügel, *Alles in uns schweige. Erfahrungen der Stille*, München 1999.

³⁵ Cf. Lehrplan für das Gymnasium in Bayern, Abschnitt „11.1, Was ist wahr? Wahrnehmung und Wirklichkeit“, „konzeptioneller Atheismus: Feuerbachs religionskritischer Ansatz“ cf. <http://www.isb-gym8-lehrplan.de/contentserv/3.1.neu/g8.de/index.php?StoryID=26176> (19.03.2010).

³⁶ Cf. G. Büttner, How theologizing with children can work, in: *British Journal of Religious Education* Vol. 29, No. 2, March 2007, 127–139.

Why was everything in chaos?
When did make God continents?
Why didn't God create any children?
Why weren't there any dinosaurs in the story?
Why were there only seven days?
Why did it always happen the way God commanded it?
How did God come (into the world)?³⁷

A very long and intensive conversation emerged from the question of Sa. (pupil):

Sa: Why did it always happen the way God commanded it?
Teach: What do you mean by that?
Sa: God is not, not [keeps thinking], is not God, not the ruler of the world. I'll say.
Mi: But I'd say God is!
[various pupils]: Yes. Yes.
Sa: No-o!
Js: You don't think of God.
Teach: Please explain what you mean by that.
Mi: Well, I'd say God *is* the ruler, because who else in the world could create all things, so he is the ruler over the whole world.
Sa: No-o. Everybody can decide for themselves. They do not have to listen to that ***
[slang omitted] guy above.

My first question to "Sa." revealed that behind her question stood the conviction that God is not able to create something as the result of a mere command because God is "not the ruler of the world". This clear position provokes the other interlocutor's replies. "Mi." justifies her position referring to an almost scholastic inference that there is nobody else in the world who is able to create everything. The conversation takes a new direction. The girl "Sa." correlates the idea of ruling with another dimension, the human auto-determination:

Everybody can take their life into their own hands. This dimension does not come up in adult exegesis when we look at the famous commentaries on Genesis although it expresses something crucial to children. To what extent can I determine my life and who decides for me

³⁷ M. Fricke, 'Schwierige' Bibeltexte im Religionsunterricht. Theoretische und empirische Elemente einer alttestamentlichen Bibeldidaktik für die Primarstufe, Göttingen 2005, 363.

in everyday-life? These questions are dealt with in the subsequent conversation which, due to the limitations of this lecture, we cannot go into more deeply here.³⁸

Summary: The following conclusions are of utmost importance:

1. We must expect to encounter childhood atheism even in primary school. Even among those children who take part in religious education classes, there can always be some who question the existence of God and are able to put their conviction in words.
2. Teaching about the sensitive issue “creation” in primary school should always begin by asking children about their conception of the world. Many of today’s children know the Big Bang theory and the stages of evolution although in a very crude manner, full of mistakes and misunderstandings. (Cf. “Wow, that banged so loud, everybody woke up and began to work ...”).³⁹
3. The encounter with the biblical text comes only at the second stage. The teacher should introduce it to the children as a song of praise, not as a “news report”. In this sense, psalms might be more appropriate than Gen 1. The teacher should create within the children the ability to perceive the biblical text as an expression of compliments to God, similar to the compliments one person receives from another. They should recognize the specific mode of wonder and amazement because of everything that exists.
4. During the process of learning, children should become able to accept creation as a gift in the same way as they understand their own life as a gift. Here, the teacher may refer to the birthday celebration providing the fundamental experience of owing one’s own life to somebody else.
5. In religious education children should be permitted to agree or disagree with the religious matters and interpretations offered. That even includes rejecting religious interpretations.
6. Our aim is to develop complementary thinking: That is, to acknowledge the scientific explanation of the world and still to live in the attitude of amazement und gratefulness for the heavenly gift of life. Can this ambitious goal be ever achieved? If at all, it can

³⁸ Cf. Fricke 2005, 373ff.

³⁹ A nine-year-old explains the Big Bang, cf. G. Kunkel, *Biblische Schöpfungserzählungen in der Grundschule*, in: *Kat BI 128* (2003), 52-50, here 55.

only be by small steps. We have to look for sub-goals: Recognizing and tolerating different opinions, practicing thoughtfulness, formulating thoughts, cultivating sensitivity and openness towards religious attitudes in the light of scientific knowledge about the world.