

Designs of Meaning

Ambiguitäten – Identitäten – Sinnentwürfe

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Designs of Meaning

Religious Educational Research under Construction

Edited by
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Introduction

“Life is powerful enough, people will help it to come to the surface. As researchers we have the task of anticipating meaningfully on this process of emergence.”¹ Almost twenty five years later, this quote by Belgian religious educator Herman Lombaerts still captures the imagination. In human beings there is an irresistible urge to live in dignity in complex circumstances. Crises call for deeper reflection on what is desirable for the good life and how ideal and reality should be aligned. People are resourceful when it comes to the quality of life. Researchers have the task of meaningfully anticipating these processes of “emerging life”. Standing with both feet in concrete reality and listening closely to people’s ordinary lives, they must promote the quality of life and subject the loss of this quality to legitimate criticism in their research.

However, scientific *anticipation* of this quality-of-life process is under pressure today. The problems emerging in society are highly complex, frequent and often unpredictable. The decisions made on a personal, social and political level are ambiguous and tense. People seek creative ways to keep life livable and improve it, but increasingly they do so with a sense of urgency. Problems present themselves and demand quick solutions in order to preserve a minimum of a good life. Many feel overcharged and powerless in this regard. For the humanities, this development means that more and more empathetic capacity and collaborative methods are required to understand how people experience life today and how shifts in perspective can meaningfully contribute to greater agency.

In the world of education, the need to anticipate the future and ensure the agency of young people is undoubtedly the first maxim. In a world of ambiguities and identity tensions, children and youth are entitled to a meaningful life horizon that invites them to take personal responsibility. The scholars who contributed to this volume are aware of this, especially since most of them are or have been active in the

¹ Citation in *B. Roebben/M. Warren* (eds.), *Religious Education as Practical Theology. Essays in Honour of Professor Herman Lombaerts* (ANL 40), Leuven/Paris/Sterling (VA) 2001, xiv.

education sector themselves. Their theoretical concepts, empirical observations and didactic models remain close to the lived reality of children and young people, as well as their desire for action competence and a future worth living for, in short: their desire for life.

The subject of religious education (RE) is the pre-eminent place in school where children and young people are supported in their moral and spiritual growth. In most European countries, there are structures for teacher education and an appropriate organization of RE as a subject in public schools. In Germany, this provision is even enshrined in the constitution. In this book, the authors focus on the question of how RE can contribute to the formation of “designs of meaning” (in German: *Sinnentwürfe*) for children and young people. What role do teachers play in this context? What hermeneutic and didactic skills do teachers need to create so-called “powerful learning environments” for RE? And what role is assigned to the children and young people themselves? Can they be seen as co-creators of “designs of meaning” – and this on the basis of their seismographic function, their sense of the shock waves passing through time and on the basis of their desire for a stable humane future for all as well as their inherent nature of hope?

The scholars who contributed to this volume are all affiliated with the Chair of Religious Education of the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Bonn. Some are formally attached to the chair, most of them are professionally active in the field of RE and are writing a dissertation in the field. This book is not only a showcase for their innovative research contents and ground-breaking methodologies, but also an attempt to make important insights from the German discourse accessible to the international research community. With this “International knowledge transfer”², we aim to open a learning space for dialogue between experts who share with us the sense of urgency, and our researchers, who are conducting exploratory research.

The first contribution by *Bert Roebben and Marina Kiroudi* discusses the ChaPTheR project that explores how children are or can become participants in theological research. Central themes such as the repre-

² Cf. *F. Schweitzer/P. Schreiner*, International Knowledge Transfer in Religious Education – A Manifesto for Discussion, in *Religious Education* 115 (2020), 10–14.

sentation *of* children, empowerment *with* children and orientation *for* children are highlighted. Global questions and local responses from children are inter-contextually linked and operationalized for further research.

Barbara Niedermann describes in her contribution the starting points, intermediate insights and open questions of the SpiRiTEx project. This project connects future RE teachers internationally and invites them to engage and learn from sacred spaces, texts and rituals. The metaphor of pilgrimage serves as a narrative thread linking participants' experiences to broader research questions.

In her contribution, *Maike Maria Domsel* discusses three postmodern artworks that encourage students to perceive Jesus not as a static historical figure but as a symbol of humanity, empathy, and hope. The refreshing connection between art, theology and pedagogy opens up opportunities for transformative learning, especially in contexts in which traditional images may have lost their meaningfulness.

Lars Wosnitza explores how "enquiry-based learning" can be a good way of designing meaning. He uses the "RE-searchers Approach", developed at the University of Exeter, as a path to formulating a new principle of RE. He transfers this approach into the German educational context of competency orientation and explores what both approaches can learn from each other in terms of developing student agency.

For *Rafael Bartsch*, contemporary classroom questions form a starting point for his research into how young people in multi-religious settings discuss the existence of God and develop their own "god-talk". To this end, he draws on a constructivist approach to learning processes and a comparative approach to theology, which can support the teacher in dealing with the complexities in the classroom.

Helena Boelke examines the role of experiments in RE. She draws on John Dewey's ideas on experience, knowledge and learning. Contemporary concepts such as learner-centered didactics, learning by doing and performative learning take on a new gloss and meaning from this historical lecture.

In their comprehensive essay, *Juliette van Deursen-Vreeburg*, *Bert Roebben*, *Madeleine Stüttem* and *Sander Vloebergs* explore the practice of active listening as a contemplative way of being an RE teacher. The wisdom of Benedict of Nursia, Hadewijch and Eckhart offers food for

thought to call attention to silence and reflection in the classroom in a renewed and legitimate way today.

In his contribution, *Bert Roebben* takes stock of four decades of moral education research and points out the important developments in the vision of ethical formation that have taken place since then, spurred by social and political circumstances. He makes a plea for more attention to the emotional dimension of moral education, especially through compassion, and points to concrete applications for RE.

Lukas Golla examines the concept of spiritual abuse within the framework of the catechetical task of the Roman Catholic church. He describes the factors that contribute to allowing abuse of power in religious learning processes to occur and to remain under the radar. He argues for more openness and communicative skills in faith formation with youth and adults.

In the final essay, *Bert Roebben* examines sacramental catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church as a test-case for the challenging conversation between practical theology and systematic theology. In the approach of “Theopoetics of Practice”, he finds a promising starting point to pursue this conversation in depth and seek new ways to re-orient theological research from the concept of “lived theology”.

As editors, we are grateful for the substantial support that we were privileged to experience with this book project. We would like to thank the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Bonn for including this volume in the series “Ambiguitäten – Identitäten – Sinentwürfe”, as well as the “Open Access Publication Fund” and the “Transdisciplinary Research Area 4”, both of the University of Bonn, for the generous financial support. We thank Mr. Clemens Carl of Herder Verlag for the careful supervision of the publication process. We would also like to thank the authors for their content-rich contributions and the research associated with it. They are all available for further discussion and can be contacted by e-mail. Finally, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to Sylvia Sokolowski for proof-reading the English texts and to Katharina Juchem for carefully editing the footnotes.

This volume is both a scholarly offering and a call to action: to imagine, teach, and research religious education with courage and care, for the sake of a future in which young people can thrive.

We are delighted about the publication of the book and wish all readers a rewarding read.

July 1, 2025 Bert Roebben, Marina Kiroudi, Barbara Niedermann

