

Abstract: »Research in religious pedagogics as a contribution to the religious education and company of persons with mental retardation«

The dissertation deals with empirical research as a necessary contribution to religious education and company of children, adolescents, and adults with mental retardation. In four successive parts, a so-called „multi-methodological and multi-modal approach of empirical research“ is developed theoretically and put into practical research.

The **first part** works out the historical dimensions of religious research and its relevance for contemporary religious pedagogics in the field of special education. The main findings are: Until the 1940s, empirical religious research was considered to be an area of responsibility inherent in religious pedagogics in the field of special education. In the following times to date, this research tradition and the continuing discussion of contemporary theories of religious development were neglected.

Granted that empirical research is indispensable for the construction of curricula, in **part two** the metatheoretical background of empirical research within religious pedagogics and its crucial points of research are outlined.

In **part three**, the methodological considerations take shape in an „anthropology under the perspective of religious pedagogics“. This step seems necessary as contemporary theories of religious development were not yet discussed intensively with regard to people with mental retardation. Three paradigms of contemporary special education (the medical, constructivist, and social-psychological paradigm) serve as working models for the evaluation of empirical findings within the scope of contemporary theories of religious development: the biological perspective, the cognitive–structural approach (GOLDMAN; KOHLBERG; ELKIND; OSER & GMÜNDER), and comprehensive theories (FOWLER; KEGAN; ERIKSON) of religious and self development respectively. Some characteristic problems are outlined here, with reference to contemporary theories of mental retardation. It seems that the tacit amalgamation of epistemological structures and themes generated by life experience, the underlying symbol concept, and the focus on certain psychic processes are the main obstacles for an adequate interpretation of the mentally retarded's religiousness.

In the **final part (4)**, the above considerations are put into an empirical multi-methodological and multi-modal research project with a group of 85 mentally retarded pupils and adults from different regions in Schleswig–Holstein

(Germany). The participants' age ranges from 6 to 43 years. Within this group, the God concept and prayer concept as core parts of human religiosity were investigated by using interview technique, questionnaires, drawings, photos, and a so-called „God-concept-test“ (BASSETT et al.). A statistical comparison of the God images preferred by the pupil group with those chosen by their parents reveals structural differences (anthropomorphic vs. abstract God images). On the basis of interview data, structure levels („Strukturebenen“) of the God concept and prayer concept were constructed and validated. On account of the fact that a mere structural interpretation is inadequate, the description of characteristic life themes (e.g. friendship; death, loss, and mourning; work and play; angels and dreams) is running parallel to the structural interpretation of God concepts. Further suggestions for an open curriculum development and a theological interpretation of individual religious ideas are made on the basis of the empirical findings.

In summary it may be said that the inclusion of persons with mental retardation was not only fruitful for theory of religious education, but also for contemporary religious development theory and research itself, because it helped realizing and solving its core problems.

The author hopes that the findings are contributing to a theory of religious development where people with and without handicaps can be represented together.