

# DISTANCE, REMEMBRANCE, TOLERANCE: EUROPEAN REMARKS ON CONTEXTUAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

*Individuals, groups and communities are coping with conflicts and crisis, which include the diversity of lifestyles. This statement can be made in different ages and cultures; it becomes of interest when combined with a church or confessional context. Therefore, the first issue and authority for Christian education is how to develop opportunities to find one's own ways of remembering leading to a tolerant attitude towards other ways of life. The study underlines the importance of the contextual approach in Christian education (consisting of religious, systemic, biographical and intercultural research) by analyzing examples of different European traditions. Decoding, deconstructing and reconstructing coping strategies and cultures of remembrance in a contextual way make sure that only by facilitating opportunities of sharing experiences people and organizations can learn to cope with transitions and difficulties in a reasonable and equitable manner.*

**Key words:** *Christianity, culture, Europe, remembrance, tolerance.*

## **Introduction**

The following study is an example to perform a tolerance-curriculum for an intolerant area by analyzing Christian examples from European past and present times, examples of human biographies and religious communities from a Protestant point of view.

Following the model of social-integrative education in school (Tausch & Tausch, 1998) and the interpretive approach of religious education (Jackson, 1997), this concept of mutual and common learning of pupils with different resources should be transferred into the context of parishes. It further should be integrated together with the approaches of intercultural training (Auernheimer, 2003; Borelli, 1986), of encounter-groups (Nieke, 2000) and project-work (Warwitz & Rudolf, 1977) into a concept of intercultural tolerance-education, which combines recognition and equality (Auernheimer, 2003) as principles in an universal and relativistic sense (Honneth, 1994).

### *Tolerance in an Intolerant World*

The daily news show that many attempts to implement more understanding between individuals, groups, religions and nations failed during the last centuries and still fail.

The need to learn tolerant attitudes towards other points of view can be noticed either in single biographies - as stages of transitions, conflicts between generations and in relationships - or social contexts - as transitions in society, conflicts between groups, communities, nations, religions, cultures. Therefore, it intends intercultural training, as well as the ability to share one's own convictions and traditions in a non-violent approach with others.

Because such conflicts and challenges depend on contexts, such as communicative situations, discourses, encounters, historical and social conditions, the process of contextual education is an essential facilitating strategy to cope with them.

### *Tolerance by Contextual Christian Education*

Based on the author's research on Christian education in the German (Franzenburg, 2010) and the European context (Franzenburg, 2011), the focus in this paper is on the interdependence between biographical and systemic approaches and on the importance of Christian education for implementing a curriculum of learning tolerance in communities.

## **Contextual Christian Education as a Way towards Tolerance**

The following study underlines the value of contextual education in Christian communities and groups with children, pupils and adults. It depends on the concept of collective identity (Gergen, 1991, Giddens, 1991) and the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The analysis of published and unpublished educational and church-oriented texts and of narrative interviews with members of Christian communities suggests the following considerations:

### *Contextual Christian Education as a Categorical System*

Contextual Christian education integrates biographical, systemic, narrative and phenomenological approaches. It is a way of holistic teaching and collaborative learning, and a way to test and evaluate phenomena of human attitudes following stages of transitions in the biographical and social dimension. These stages develop a categorical system of biographical, systemic and dialogical attitudes, which can be transferred into the cultural context of geographical and historical situations.

### *Stages of Transitions*

Tolerance and intolerance both begin in early childhood. The development into the one or the other process depends on the way how parents and other adults behave. When their actions and reactions towards the individual child and his/her brothers and/or sisters attempt to treat them in the category of justice or partnership, the children can become more tolerant towards each other.

Children learn from the attitude of their parents and other adults towards foreign people (Noack, 2001). Therefore, it is useful for adults to accept their role as models for their children. Concerning the curriculum of tolerance-learning, these observations suggest the recognition of imitation learning as an educational category. This can be exercised in institutions like the family-centers or public schools, where the different generations and cultures meet and gain experiences with foreign attitudes and points of view by using the model of intercultural dialogue (Franzenburg, 2010).

For adolescents coping with the search for identity is a significant challenge; therefore, they need the support of adults and peer-groups and depend on their recognition or appreciation (Erikson, 1968). These authorities can assist them in developing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995).

For older adults, there is not only the responsibility and challenge to care for children but also for themselves. There are situations in life, when people become aware of their limitations and encounter with their "shadows". In such situations, the category of neutral and

value-free perception becomes crucial. On the way to integrate past, presence and future in a context-conform identity (Oerter and Dreher, 2002), people have to recognize all aspects of their biography without discrimination. Adults, who teach to distinct between perception and interpretation, help younger people to encounter with others in an open-minded manner.

This can be exercised in parishes and communities, where people with different capacities and resources (cognitive, physical, and communicative) encounter to develop a common project by using the category of diversity by sharing experiences and mutual enrichment.

Retired persons recognizing the limitation of life have to find out perspectives and attitudes, which help them to cope with this challenge in an adequate way; this could be by training their inner capacities and resources and considering the value of their experiences with the category of remembrance and reflection. Therefore, the concept of cultural memory (Assmann, 1992) is helpful.

Sharing experiences for a culture of remembrance or a mentoring system can encounter the generations and promote historical thinking. This can be experienced in all institutions, where different generations encounter such as Family center, school, parish, and community.

These stages suggest the integration of systemic, biographical and dialogical approaches to develop a tolerance-based and tolerance-oriented curriculum, which integrates aspects of the past (remembrance), presence (distance) and future (acceptance).

#### *Sampling Categories of Experience*

By sampling and analyzing examples of individual and social experiences in European Christian contexts, following e.g. the history of the Leuenberger Konkordie (Hüffmeier, 1993) or the REDco project (Weisse, 2007), certain categories of experiences of coping strategies and attitudes become obvious: justice and partnership, model learning, neutral perception, diversity by sharing and mutual enrichment, remembrance and reflection, sharing experiences. Considering experiences facilitates teaching and learning situations and develops a curriculum by using such categories. The catechetical tradition is such an approach, which demonstrates the value of categories of experience. Therefore, texts from and narrative interviews with German speaking parishes in Europe, concerning church life and biographical events, underline the importance to recognize their educational impacts and consequences. The data and narratives lead to a curriculum with the focus on implementing tolerant attitudes towards own and foreign experiences, attitudes and values.

Such categories of experience are part of the main dimensions of human existence: System, dialogue and biography, which can be recognized as theoretical approaches towards a tolerance-curriculum.

Existence means to exist as an individual together with other individuals within a certain system; therefore, to become tolerant by remembrance means to share experiences with others within a certain framework. Therefore, a tolerance-curriculum should recognize these dimensions as approaches and the categories, which they impact, as its matrix: status and role for the systemic approach, perception and interpretation for the dialogical, and memory and character for the biographical approach.

For the topic of tolerance and remembrance within the systemic dimension, the aspects of status and role are essential: People remember and experience themselves as persons playing certain roles and following internal and external expectations.

In order to become tolerant towards foreign and contradictory attitudes, people should learn to play with roles and status-aspects in certain aspects:

*Support versus Superiority or: Partnership Is No Hierarchy*

Learning tolerant attitudes means to tolerate and appreciate foreign attitudes and points of view as enrichment and complement. From a systemic and spiritual point of view, the other is essential for me to become a fully functioning person (Buber, 2008; Rogers, 1961).

*Invitation versus Imitation or: Learning Is No Copy-Making*

If learning tolerant attitudes means to tolerate, what seems foreign and strange, learning has to become an invitation to make experiences and not attempt to spread mainstream knowledge. Therefore, strengthening the individual abilities and resources instead of standard-behavior and knowledge-canon are essential approaches towards tolerance.

Following the dialogic action approach (Freire, 1970); the aspects of perception and interpretation are necessary: People remember and experience themselves in communication-situations, where words, tones, texts, subtexts and body-language become a part of the situation by interpretation. Therefore, in order to become tolerant towards foreign and contradictory messages and convictions, people should learn to play with such situations and should avoid false interpretations.

*Interperception versus Interpretation or: Mutual Awareness Avoids Conflicts*

In order to learn tolerant attitudes people have to avoid stereotypes, which often lead to conflict situations (Bar-Tal and Teichmann, 2005). Therefore, to become aware of one's own and of the foreign character and attitudes, not by rumors, prejudice or interpretation, but by pure mutual perception, is crucial. Perceiving behavior with critical appreciation avoids discrimination of persons and their imagined intentions.

*Enrichment versus Embarrassment or: Foreign Attitudes as Complements*

When people do so, foreign and strange behavior of others and their attitude become less challenging, threatening or embarrassing, but can be recognized as enrichment and complement.

Following the biographical approach, the aspects of memory and character are essential: People remember and experience themselves by reconstruction situations in which they acted in a certain way (Rosenthal, 1995). By doing so, they often rather are deconstructing by forming their own self that might be agreeable for other persons. In order to become tolerant towards foreign and contradictory aspects of their real self, playing with one's constructs can avoid the false shame and role-play.

*Re-creation versus Reconstruction or: Memories as Actual Constructions*

In this sense, learning tolerant attitudes also means to find out alternative approaches towards one's own experiences in the past. Remembering is not reconstructing events that happened, but the actual construction of the importance of an experienced event for the actual situation. Therefore, memories should be used as experiences that manifest their wealth and richness just in the moment of sharing, of creative and common de- and reconstruction as re-creation (Rosenthal, 1995).

### *Sharing versus Shame or: the Art of Feedback*

An open-minded and mutual accepting attitude is crucial for learning tolerant attitudes. Such framework improves the self-confidence that is necessary to reveal oneself towards others.

These theoretical considerations should be exemplified by the aspects of European historical situations, traditions, discourses, and memory cultures, in order to demonstrate, how tolerance can be taught in a non-directive, experience- and community oriented holistic and sustainable manner, e.g. by using the global and integrating ritual of prayer (Franzenburg, 2011).

#### *Historical Situations*

Regarding the religious situation in Europe, the four stages are obvious, which can be compared with an individual biography: National and cultural identity and collective memory have to do with indigenous, childlike culture. In the following development, other influences become obvious like social impacts on adolescents or young adults.

During the middle ages, Christian mission mostly succeeded against the rural religion and established its own value and confessional system.

In times of Reformation, a more autonomous style substituted a greater or smaller part of the Christian people like the autonomy of older adults (see Luther's catechisms).

The final stage is the challenge to find one's own way of spiritual life by integrating their indigenous religion their roots with the experiences of church-oriented (Catholic or Orthodox) and individual (Lutheran or Reformed) tradition, and with their own considerations and critique.

Every single stage can live tolerance or fall into an intolerant attitude towards other confessions and spiritual practices. Therefore, to practice partnership without any hierarchy is an essential step in this process towards tolerant attitudes.

During the change of different historical ages and paradigmatic terms, a complementary attitude towards former rituals, theories and confessions can help to develop a tolerant point of view.

Such attitude prefers to invite others to share experiences and knowledge instead of suggesting dogmatic formulas. Like the early mystics became aware of secret rituals and of pagan knowledge, and like the Reformation depended on the biblical and early Christian tradition, modern Christian education keeps the treasure of multicultural and ecumenical rituals and implements dialogical structures in communities. Therefore, other cultures - within a religion or external - become a complementary enrichment for the own confession and an invitation to consider one's own traditions and convictions as living and actual treasures, which can be shared without any shame or stereotypes.

#### *Religious Traditions*

The evaluation of the Diaspora situation of Lutheran parishes (Gustav-Adolf-Werk, 1966-2010) underlines the importance of cultural identity and cultures of remembrance:

The different religious stages in the history of nations imply certain religious traditions, which show different confessions, rituals, and attitudes, which also influence the process towards tolerance or intolerance: The indigenous tradition underlines the value of nature and landscape and gives them a transcendent character. Especially in the Scandinavian and Baltic countries this attitude can be noticed until modern times and influences the religious life, e.g. by nature rituals.

The Catholic tradition underlines the value of the institution and gives it a transcendent character. Especially in Mediterranean countries the Catholic Church demonstrates the enormous power and influence into families, society and individual life.

The Orthodox tradition underlines the value of liturgy and gives it a transcendent character. This can be noticed especially in Rumanian or Bulgarian or Greek parishes during services.

The tradition of the Reformation underlines the value Gods Word and gives it a transcendent character. Especially in Germany, Switzerland, the BENELUX countries, Bohemia and Denmark with its Scandinavian and Baltic neighbors, can be noticed, how Christian life develops by Christian schools, Christian education (catechism) and doctrines.

Similar the Pietism tradition underlines the value of Christian behavior and gives it a transcendent character. Coming from a Lutheran or Reformed tradition the doctrine and the message should be deepened and strengthened

The tradition of modernity, influenced by the age of enlightenment and industrialization, underlines the value of individuality and progress and gives them a transcendent character. This can be noticed in secular societies, especially in Eastern Europe.

All these different traditions are to be used as parts of a universal treasure, which can be shared in an open-minded atmosphere of partnership and tolerance. That means that common projects can be organized, which recognize the historical circumstances and individual coping strategies (Franzenburg, 2011).

Such projects could be common youth projects between Germany, Poland and Latvia, remembering the Shoa or concerning the life of Baltic refugees in Germany; also workshops in non-violent communication and work camps for restoring Jewish or War- cemeteries in Eastern Europe help to become aware of the emotional, biographical and social impact of historical events.

Such projects can foster mutual understanding and awareness and avoid stereotypes and teach how to distinguish between action and actors, individual, communicative and cultural memory and to implement the cultures of remembrance by analyzing different discourses.

### *Cultures of Remembrance*

Experiences, which people and communities made in historical contexts, integrate the framework and tradition into a culture of remembrance and influence the cultural identity of a person and a group. Such cultures of remembrance find their expression in adapted rules and rituals, narrations and discourses. An important method to analyze them is oral history: By interviews or archival research, people learn to different dimensions of experiences into their own attitude.

If learning tolerant attitudes means to tolerate, what seems foreign and strange, learning has to become an invitation to make experiences and not attempt to spread mainstream knowledge.

Therefore, strengthening the individual abilities and resources instead of standard-behavior and knowledge-canon are essential approaches towards tolerance (Forum Politische Bildung, 2010).

In order to learn tolerant attitudes people have to avoid stereotypes, which often lead to conflicts. Therefore, to become aware of one's own and of the foreign character and attitudes not by rumors, prejudice or interpretation, but by mutual (inter-) perception is crucial.

Perceiving behavior with critical appreciation avoids discrimination. Therefore, foreign and strange behavior of others and their attitude become less challenging or embarrassing and can be recognized as enrichment and complement.

In this sense, learning tolerant attitudes also means to find out alternative approaches



towards one's own experiences in the past. Remembering is not mere reconstructing events that happened, but the actual construction of the importance of an experienced event for the actual situation. Therefore, memories should be used as experiences that manifest their wealth and richness just in the moment of sharing, of creative and common de- and reconstruction as the process of re-creation (Assmann, 1992; Rosenthal, 1995; Erll, 2005).

An open-minded and mutual accepting attitude is crucial for learning tolerant attitudes.

Such framework improves the self-confidence that is necessary to reveal oneself towards others.

This attitude can transform and integrate individual experiences not only in a common culture of remembrance, but also in a cultural identity (Snow, 2001).

## Results

In historical situations, discourses and cultures of remembrance in different European countries certain strategies to become more tolerant towards foreign and strange convictions, messages and behavior, can be noticed. They remind of transitions in human life: coping with one's own and the other persons' status and role, to interpret perceptions according to one's own speculations and expectations, remember events according to other persons' expectation.

In such situations of biographical or cultural transitions from one influence to on other tolerant and intolerant attitudes towards oneself and others are possible solutions. Therefore, the process towards a tolerant cultural identity of individuals as a group or encounter should be facilitated by a curriculum, which integrates open-minded and mutual learning and awareness, sharing and communication:

Young and elder people encounter in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and equal partnership for intergenerational learning. Following models of tolerant behavior from biblical and historical tradition, and comparing them with their own biography, help people accepting their own limitations and becoming aware of the framework for this process.

Within the framework of biographical, social and systemic influences, people become aware of the richness of their fellows and peer-groups and integrate their experiences into a culture of acceptance and mutual understanding.

Therefore, a curriculum for this learning process should recognize the following aspects:

### *Responsibility by Common Remembrance*

Tolerance-oriented work with young persons (children, adolescents, pupils) means to recognize the responsibility of the participants by esteeming individual experiencing and searching for common experiences behind. Concerning adult education the focus is more on memories and the search for a common culture of remembrance by finding combining and integrating rituals

### *Communities by Common Contexts*

Such culture of remembrance and cultural identity is developing in classroom, long term workshops, encounter-groups and parishes by establishing common rituals, narratives and symbols, e.g. Remembrance days, reconciliation pictures and gestures, reconciliation or remembrance trees, common meals, etc.

### *Chances by Sharing*

Within these frameworks, intercultural dialogues become possible, not only between different nations or religions, but also between different peer-groups, milieus and generations.

## **Discussion**

The comparison of different historical, cultural and biographical traditions of Christian education and their impact on tolerance-education suggests decoding, deconstructing and reconstructing coping strategies and cultures of remembrance in a contextual way; thus it facilitates opportunities to share experiences, which help people and organizations to cope with transitions and crisis and their multicultural character in a constructive and tolerant way.

The study invites researchers and teachers of Christian education to consider how to de- and reconstruct cultural, individual and social constructions and how to assist others developing common constructions of tolerant inter-cultures.

In order to facilitate opportunities of tolerance-learning in an interreligious, intercultural and/or intergenerational context, the following methods, adapted to work with pupils or adults, are helpful:

- International newspapers help to facilitate contact with strangers (Apel, Knoll, 2001).
- Performing Kleist's famous Ring-Parable facilitates discussions about "Welt-Ethos" (Küng, 1990).
- Analyzing political programs from contradictory systems such as Hitler vs. Stalin or Capitalism vs. Socialism, facilitates historical thinking and intercultural competence (Arendt, 1951).

Contextual Christian education facilitates cultures of remembrance and opens them for global comparison and sharing by recognizing the cultural memory of communities and groups (Cornelißen, Klinkhammer, Schwentker, 2004; Eisenstadt, Giesen, 1995; Forum Politische Bildung, 2010). When people are able to communicate both further on in a global intercultural dialogue, this also can avoid Europe-centered Orientalism (Said, 1978; Yousefi, 2006).

## **Conclusions**

Following this invitation, further research and practice in Christian education can transfer the consequences from this research into actual educational work. Therefore, it is helpful to recognize the European framework for constructive cultures of remembrance and the biographical context of constructive Christian education.

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