The aesthetic dimension of believing and learning

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Abstract

There is a common stereotype that in Religious Education (RE) classes, students surprisingly often study paintings or paint pictures, analyze poems or write creative texts, sing or do handcrafts, etc. There is something about these educational methods that seems to make (notably Catholic) RE different from other subjects. The question is whether this difference is more than a stereotype, and instead could be understood as a trademark of RE. This paper aims to argue that the key to this question lies in the so-called aesthetic dimension of believing and learning. Correlating theological and educational perspectives, this chapter first provides an appropriate definition of aesthetics as reflecting about sensually mediated receptive and productive human actions of cognition. Second, it justifies aesthetic actions (like singing, writing, meditating, talking about paintings etc.) as essential building blocks of being religious and learning about, respectively from religion. Finally, it proposes two elementary educational guidelines for designing and implementing aesthetic learning processes in RE.

Aesthetics: only an end in itself?

Aesthetics is a big word laden with manifold meaning. Like most philosophical key terms it sounds equally programmatic as overawing. It may trigger positive connotations, just as it can give rise to suspicion. It is

often connected with promises but also generates misgivings as we are inclined to admire high *aesthetic quality* and usually turn away if a solemn message proves to be only *pure aesthetics*. This general ambivalence may even grow if we combine aesthetics with other terms which can be considered equally normative or emotionally charged like religion, faith, or theology, for example (Brown, 1990, pp. 1–5, Brown, 2000, pp. 3–4; Cilliers, 2011, p. 267). The connection of aesthetics with faith, religion, or RE easily brings to mind in a critical way the sociological tendency towards total aestheticization of our entire life sphere (Berzano, 2011, pp. 70–72) which might result in a preference of form over message, package over content.

This and similar misgivings are in line with a common stereotype according to which in RE classes, students surprisingly often study paintings or paint pictures, analyze poems or write creative texts, sing or do handcrafts, etc. The question is whether these aesthetic educational methods are only an end in themselves and compete negatively with a more content-oriented form of RE. Against such misunderstandings, this chapter aims to argue that both areas of faith and aesthetics should be seen as, first, inseparably linked and, second, deeply rooted in everyday forms of communicative action having but little to do with a banal aestheticization of everyday life. The thesis is that religiosity and faith as life-relevant orientations which become concrete in everyday forms of communicative action always have an aesthetic dimension. Consequently, aesthetic actions are to be understood as essential building blocks of being religious and learning about, respectively from religion. Or, as Katherine Douglass (2013) recently argued: “[B]ecause of its ability to aid in expression, connection, and opening, the aesthetic can be engaged as an integral dimension of Christian formation.” (p. 456)

In the following, the argumentation of this essay aims to correlate philosophical (most precisely epistemological), theological and pedagogical perspectives in order to identify a general aesthetic

dimension of believing and learning which finally boils down to two elementary guidelines for RE.

The aesthetic within an epistemological approach

From the eighteenth to the twentieth century, aesthetics was widely narrowed to the philosophical reflection of arts (Brown, 1990, p. 5; Kivy, 2004, pp. 1–4). Its primary notion could vary between a pessimistic and an optimistic alternative, both rooting in contrary anthropological presuppositions. While the former goes back to Plato's theory of beauty whereupon the phenomena of beauty are to be understood as a faint mirror of true ideas (Gaut & Lopes, 2001, pp. 3–13), the latter refers primarily to Aristotelian thinking emphasizing the cathartic role of art in the human approach to the good, true and beautiful (Gaut & Lopes, 2001, pp. 15–26). The educational impetus behind the latter led thinkers of the European Enlightenment, above all Friedrich Schiller, to believe in a prominent role of art in education. What henceforth, following Schiller (1967), has been called aesthetic education in a wide sense follows the idea of fostering educational goals – like "harmony in the individual" bringing "harmony into society" (p. 215) – with and through arts (Viladesau, 1999, pp. 6–7). This also holds for almost every approach to aesthetics in RE (for example Durka & Smith, 1979; Harris, 1988; McMurtary, 2007; Miller, 2003; Pike, 2002), while only little attention has been drawn to the aesthetic practice of children (Altmeyer, 2006; Douglass, 2013; Heimbrock, 1999).

On the basis of such approaches, we may identify another notion of aesthetics as rooted in the literal meaning of the Greek term αἴσθησις (perception). In this line of thought, aesthetics no longer means to focus exclusively on fine arts, but points to the sensual dimension of human cognition. The centre of interest of aesthetics then lies in the "general study of sensation … in the wider sense of non-conceptual or non-

discursive (but nevertheless 'intellectual') knowledge." (Viladesau, 1999, p. 7)

In order to illustrate this epistemological approach to the aesthetic, one could refer to the Belgian surrealist René Magritte (1898-1967) who worked on this topic in a series of paintings titled "La condition humaine" (the human condition). In one of these paintings from 1948 (print in: Grunenberg & Pih, 2011, p. 198) we see a realistic picture of a mouth of a cave, the viewer's look going from the dark inside to the light outside adumbrating a mountain scenery. On the left edge, a campfire is burning. Only one objective does not fit into the image: In the centre of the mouth of the cave, Magritte placed an easel with a painting on it. Being also realistic, this painting shows an identical copy of the view from the cave to the light outside which painter and spectator share. It is only through the perspective of view and the spectator's aesthetic cooperation that it becomes possible to distinguish between picture and picture-in-picture. In an absolutely surprising and vivid way, this painting points to the difference between reality and its appearance in human sensual cognition. One could indeed think of Plato's allegory of the cave: Where human beings are looking to the outside of their cave and where they reflect on their own perception of the 'real world', the double ground of all human cognition which is always sensually mediated comes out. "That's how we see the world. We see it outside of ourselves while only having an inner representation of it." (Magritte, 2001, p. 144, own translation)

The example of Magritte's painting has opened epistemological processes that may lead us to a notion of aesthetics in a fundamental manner: *Aesthetics means reflecting about sensually mediated receptive and productive human actions of cognition*. To see, to hear, to smell, to taste and to touch are always already actions of interpreting understanding. And, at the same time, speaking, writing, forming and so on, are always already expressions of our own understanding which can only be perceived via interpretation. "I learn about the world by constructing it

through aesthetic objects." (Viau, 2002, p. 20) There is no object of reality that cannot be seen aesthetically (as expression of our senses), just as our picture of reality is always aesthetically mediated (as perception of our senses). To speak about the aesthetic dimension of human cognition, therefore, implies distinguishing between receptive and expressive (productive) communicative actions. "In aesthetic work, action and perception are *both* at work in giving meaning and form to something." (Douglass, 2013, p. 454, my emphasis)

Theological reflections

Taking this general notion of aesthetics as a starting point, it's not a long way to understand why and how faith and religiosity are intrinsically linked to such aesthetic actions. In order to show this, I will comment briefly on some key issues of a theological aesthetics which argues in favour of thinking about Christian faith as a specific way of living and acting for which a "centrality of sensibility" (Viladesau 1999, p. 77) has to be asserted. There is a fundamental aesthetic dimension within faith which is to be found in everyday forms of communicative action. Relating faith and RE to the field of aesthetic actions does therefore not mean giving preference to secondary aspects of form over primary aspects of content and, as even Pope Francis (2013) argues, it "has nothing to do with fostering an aesthetic relativism" (para. 167), but leads to the heart of the matter of faith itself. Both "spheres overlap and interact in ways that we have barely begun to appreciate" (Brown, 2000, p. 23).

To give an example for what it means that there is an aesthetic dimension in every religious act, I will provide an interpretation of the famous statement of Paul in the letter to the Romans whereby "faith comes from what is heard" (Rom 10:17; Hultgren, 2011). From the perspective of a theological aesthetics, one could hypothesize that what Paul is describing here points to what we have called the aesthetic dimension of faith: Faith

is neither a construction of human imagination nor a projection of needs, but it is characterized by receiving something that humans cannot imagine and by the fulfilment of a hope being far beyond all human desires. Faith is rooted in a human experience with the word of God that addresses him or her. The Greek ἀκούω, to hear, also transports the meaning of 'to experience'.

Thus, what do we 'hear' if faith comes from what is heard? According to Paul it is "the word of God from hearing us" (1Thess 2:13). Three levels of aesthetic actions are combined here, comparable to the three pictorial levels in Magritte's painting (picture, picture-in-picture, viewed picture).

1. First of all, there is Jesus Christ, who is to be heard, as "what is heard comes through the word of Christ." (Rom 10:17) He is the one who brings the word of God to all humans, being at the same time identical with this divine word. As Hans Urs von Balthasar argues in his theological aesthetics, Jesus Christ is in his living and dying "the Expression and the Exegesis of God. … He *is* what he expresses – namely God – but he is not whom he expresses – namely the Father." (Balthasar, 1982, p. 29; Murphy, 1995, pp. 131–194).
2. Thus, God is speaking through Jesus Christ, so that looking on his deeds and hearing what he is saying "provide a paradigm for speech about God, about our relation to God, and about the human community called into being by God's love." (Viladesau, 1999, p. 96)
3. That is again, what Paul is passing on in his proclamation of the Gospel. He is handing down to us what he himself has received (1Cor 15:3). That faith comes from what is heard therefore implies that there is a human being who makes this message audible by expressing what he or she has received him- or herself. In which form do we hence hear God's word of revelation? "God's word", as the Belgian-born theologian Edward Schillebeeckx (1974) precisely formulates, is "a human word, spoken by real men in their own language." (p. 47, see Boeve, 2004)

Taking the perspective of what Richard Viladesau (1999) called a "theological aesthetics … 'from below'" which inquires "into the conditions of possibility in humanity for the reception and interpretation of a divine revelation" (p. 37), we see again here the aesthetic dimension of faith. Through the permanent interplay of hearing and saying, perception and expression, the dynamic of faith and tradition is initiated. In Magritte's painting, we could observe the same interplay. We became aware of how much painter and spectator rely on each other in building the meaning of a painting by changing their roles – active/receptive – permanently. In total, the example of Paul's famous tenet *fides ex auditu* shows the intrinsic interconnection of receptive and expressive aesthetic actions in the context of faith. Faith comes from what is heard in words with which human beings express their perception of experiences interpreted as the healing closeness of God. Faith begins with aesthetic perceptions such as hearing God's word, seeing his deeds, or feeling his presence, and longs for aesthetic "response" (Brown, 2000, p. 11). But the word of God is only to be heard through human words, his deeds can only be perceived in human actions, and his presence can only be felt in the personal attention of a concrete other. What we can perceive of God is what people make perceivable for us, meaning to what they give expression. Bringing the fundamental theological argument for this position to the point, Viladesau (1999) states: "God is knowable through word and image *because* and *insofar as* the human being is itself the 'image' of God." (p. 90) Following Karl Rahners *Grundkurs des Glauben*s (1978), he claims that human beings and their relations have to be understood as "embodiment or 'expression' of God's life shared with humanity and 'paradigms' or 'images' of how God acts and what God is for us." (Viladesau, 1999, p. 94)

Believing and learning

Through the above presented epistemological and theological reflections of the aesthetic dimension of faith we have come to a notion of the aesthetic as part of human cognitive and religious actions. In order to proceed form this to genuine educational aspects of religious learning we have to take a more systematic look on communicative actions underlying these processes (for the following: Altmeyer, 2010, pp. 632–633; Mager, 2012). Since learning can be defined "as the growing capacity or the growing competence of students to participate in culturally structured practices" (Wardekker & Miedema, 2001, p. 27), a theory of religious learning in its aesthetic dimension must be based on an analysis of the structures underlying explicitly religious practice. To this end, I will provide an analysis of the human practice *believing* by means of a theoretical framework derived from the theory of communicative action according to the Frankfurt school (Habermas, 1984-87). This concept is primarily based on the assumption that communication forms a central building block to understand and describe human life-world encompassing quite opposite areas of action like social, professional, family and even religious life. For this end, the theory goes beyond the simple sender-receiver-model of communication and moves towards a model of communicative rationality. To concentrate the complex theoretical framework in its basic idea, one could say in straightforward terms that each communicative act can be differentiated into five dimensions summed up in the following mnemonic: *I communicate – about something – with others – under contextual conditions – by using a specific form.* In detail, the five constituents of each communicative action described herein, are: 1) the autonomous subject that is communicating ('I communicate'), 2) the content of communication as its objective-material aspect ('about something'), 3) the subjective counterpart of communication building its inter-subjective dimension ('with others'), 4) the social life-world in which the action is situated ('under contextual conditions'), and 5) the aesthetic dimension

concerning the perceivable form of communication ('by using a specific form'). According to Habermas, a successful communication oriented towards the ideal of total absence of domination has to guarantee certain claims in all five of these dimensions, ranging from truthfulness in the subjective dimension to aesthetic coherence in questions of form.

Central to our question is the insight that there is an aesthetic dimension in every human practice which is not to be understood as perchance or arbitrary, but which forms a relevant and not to be neglected part of communication. Everything we say and hear, express and perceive is bound to the form it comes with. And if this form is not coherent to even one further dimension (to the subject, the content, the counterpart and context of communication), communication is in danger of coming to grief. If you *shout* at your students to *calm* them *down*, the success of this pedagogical intervention would scarcely be of high sustainability.

By means of this general model of communicative action it also becomes possible to analyse the specific religious act (thus completing the previous epistemological and theological arguments from a social perspective). Focusing on Christian faith, a short mnemonic parallel to that above seems appropriate: *I believe – in God – who confronts me in the person of my neighbour – under the conditions of today's life – by using condign forms of expression.* The first (and subjective) dimension refers to the inner reality of faith that motivates an individual's free decision of living in the gifted relationship to God (in the traditional terms of Augustine: *fides qua creditur*). The second (objective-material) dimension forms the necessary corrective of subjectivity and highlights the aspect of belief; no faith act could be imaginable without content (*fides quae creditur*). The third (and inter-subjective) dimension describes the relational reality of Christian faith – insofar as the vertical relationship to God is not to be separated from the horizontal relationship realized in human relations. The fourth (contextual) dimension extends this relational aspect of faith to the conditions of history and everyday life. The historical situation of faith is to be understood not only as the contingent conditions of the pure

ideas of truth and good, but as a "*locus theologicus*" (Pope Francis, 2013, para. 126, see also Viladesau, 1999, pp. 15–19) where the decisive "test of truth" (Pope Paul VI., 1975, para. 24) of faith is taking place. Every faith act, finally, has to be situated in a medial frame by use of certain subjectively authentic, inter-subjectively suitable and materially well-grounded forms, which constitute the fifth (and *aesthetic*) dimension of faith.

Parallel to the general, the specific model of faith as communicative action also points to an aesthetic dimension which is reciprocally linked to personal, material, inter-subjective, and contextual aspects. Once again and in short terms: form matters (Wolterstorff, 2004, pp. 325–328). It is not interchangeable in which form a truth of faith is formulated (as Creed, hymn, parable, or picture, for example), or how we share our faith with others (in the form of prayer, life witness, or instruction). Looking at the aesthetic dimension reminds us that there is more about faith than cognition (*fides quaerens intellectum*), practice (*fides quaerens actum*) and attitude (*fides quaerens corporalitatem*), but also the form through which it is perceived and expressed: *fides quaerens expressionem* (Altmeyer, 2006; Cilliers, 2009, Cilliers, 2011).

These theoretical reflections on Christian faith on the basis of a general theory of communicative action allow the formulation of a competence model for RE encompassing all five dimensions (Altmeyer, 2010, pp. 633–634). Especially the aesthetic dimension is now integrated and linked with all other aspects of religious learning. RE seeks to develop: *spiritual sensitivity* (subjective dimension of believing and learning), *religious knowledge and ability of reasoning* (objective-material dimension of believing and learning), *ability of relating* (inter-subjective dimension of believing and learning), *capacity for action* (contextual dimension of believing and learning), and *faculty of perception and expression* (aesthetic dimension of believing and learning). Religious learning in its aesthetic dimension encourages people to search and find an appropriate form of expressing their personal faith by bringing them into contact with

religious expressions of others, first and foremost but not exclusively with traditional religious forms. Within this model RE aims to develop a comprehensive competence which is characterized by the ability to make use of religious rationality in its five communicative dimensions, i.e. by returning to subjective points of ultimate concern, by reasoning in connection with religious tradition and creed, by relating to others as representatives of God, by substantiating options for action through religious claims, by using religiously relevant and coherent forms receptively and expressively. Aesthetic learning forms an integrated part within this comprehensive competence development.

Aesthetic learning processes in RE

Correlating these hitherto presented epistemological, theological and pedagogical reflections, we are now able to conclude that by performing receptive or productive aesthetic actions, students train their aesthetic competence in the matter of religion. “There is an aesthetic dimension to practical reason, and without the acknowledgment of this dimension, epistemological claims about experience (including experiences of God) are incomplete.” (Douglass, 2013, p. 449) Consequently, such educational methods are well justified by the matter of religion itself. The question remains, which educational means would be most appropriate for a more systematic development of aesthetic competences in RE. To this end, I will recommend two general guidelines which aim to combine receptive and productive aesthetic practices as a circling movement. While the first guideline lays emphasis on perception in RE (receptive aesthetic competence), the second is focused on expression (productive aesthetic competence).

Providing space for impression: medial reduction and retardation

The first guideline draws attention to the dramaturgy of teaching processes. As psychology of learning shows, educational processes should be structured on correlation to the students' phases of attention. This means that every subject of teaching has to be seen as something foreign whose encrypted meaning needs enough time for decryption and acquisition (Pike, 2002, pp. 18–19). Thus, before students are able to unlock meaning autonomously, they must be given the appropriate time for *attentive perception*. That is why against omnipresent tendencies of acceleration and medial flooding, teaching needs a concentration of a key medium (Caranfa, 2010, p. 78). Only by means of such medial reduction and systematic retardation of perception a space is opened where the media of teaching can achieve any effective impression on the students. Aesthetic learning in RE in this context means to implement a structured, retarding and aware process of perception which prepares the ground for individual proactive expressions of students. The aim is to help students "to indicate and create or to decipher meaning within the contexts of our essential reality, to *make sense out of reality*." (Cilliers, 2009, p. 43; Groome, 1998, pp. 433–436)

The German religious educator Joachim Theis (2013) has developed a teaching tool for working with the biblical text which may serve as an example for illustration and concretion. Against the background of Wolfgang Iser's (1997) theory of aesthetic response, he proposes the following sequence of five steps and guiding questions for exploring the Bible in RE aesthetically: 1) What am I reading? – spontaneous perception, 2) How is the text worked? – full outside concentration, 3) What does the text trigger in me? – inner perception, 4) What does the text mean? – text interpretation, and 5) Where am I within the message of the text? - textual identification. While the first and third steps emphasize the perspective of the learner – as his or her instantaneous and uncensored statement after first reading (1) or as experiential or

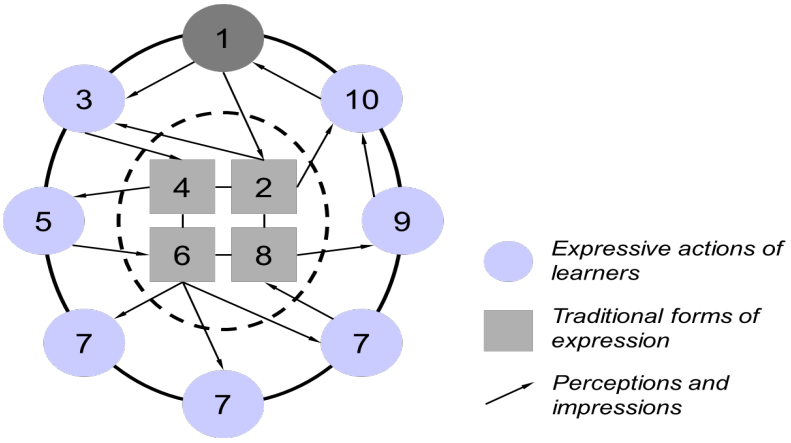
emotional impressions of the text (3) – the second and fourth step switch to an exact analysis of the text, concerning its linguistic form (2) and theological message (4). The fifth and final step aims to correlate the personal and textual perspective and initiate a dialogue between both. "Encouraging readers to allow a text to function as a 'stimulus' is a key process in facilitating personal response … as this enables them to present themselves" (Pike, 2004, p. 52) before and finally within the text. – This example illustrates what it means to profile a clearly content oriented RE as aesthetically deepened: Teaching religion (e.g. the Bible) involves to practice perception by providing space for personal impression: What am I religiously perceiving, what does religion mean to me and where am I within the religious message?

Implementing an interplay between expressive and perceptive actions: encircling learning

The second guideline gives emphasis to the point that every learning process has the task of enabling a reciprocal dynamics between learner and content. It's necessary that students become aware of their own experiences and questions in order to connect them with the teaching subject. And vice versa, cultural possessions or scientific knowledge are educationally valuable if they are able to speak to adolescents' experiences and life or future questions (Groome, 1998, pp. 434–436). Learning has to be understood "as a productive and creative process that shapes [students'] own personal religiosity and builds their world view, their religious ideas and practice" (Heimbrock, 1999, p. 52; Pike, 2002, p. 13). In the context of aesthetic learning, we find the same reciprocal dynamics within the poles of personal expressions of learners and teaching subjects which can be understood as traditional (or cultural) forms of expression (McMurtary, 2007). The point is to structure the learning process as an interplay of expressive actions of learners and

traditional forms of expression that realize a kind of encircling learning as outlined in figure 1.

Figure 1: Encircling learning (Altmeyer, 2006, p. 383)



The heart of this concept lies in a permanent alternation between expressive actions of learners and presentation of traditional forms. The following short example of a unit for primary school students on the topic of prophets may serve for better understanding (Altmeyer, 2006, pp. 382–385, picking up suggestions of the German teacher trainer Rainer Oberthür). The unit starts with a creative task (1 in figure 1). Within a playful scenario, the pupils are asked to write a so-called speech to humanity: Imagine you have the possibility to speak to all the people on earth, what would you say? After that, the teacher presents a collection of short quotes from prophets' words together with the task to pick out one quote fitting their own speech (2). In the next step, the pupils are invited to create pictures about their speech and the selected quote (3), followed by the presentation of prophet paintings of artists (4). Students are asked to associate what such people as those illustrated in the paintings are doing (5). Only after all these creative, receptive, and reflective actions, is the term 'prophet' together with elementary factual information introduced (6). By that time, the pupils have already acted

out as a prophet (speech to humanity) and reflected on what prophets are doing, thinking and feeling. This is not the place for a detailed presentation and evaluation of the whole unit, but I hope the crucial point of my second guideline has become clear. This basically concerns giving high priority to learners' expressive activities through which they can anticipate or work up the human experiences condensed in traditional religious forms of expression. – By this, we offer students the opportunity to enter the religious world by "reflective expression" (McMurtary, 2007, p. 88; Pike, 2002, p. 10). Teaching religion (e.g. the Prophets) involves practicing aesthetic competence by providing space for personal expression: How would I express my own spirituality, what do traditional religious forms mean to me and how would I transform them into something like a personal religious lifestyle?

After all, coming back to the initial question of whether and why it should be reasonable to say that students in RE classes sing, compose poems, engage in creative writing, paint, or analyze and meditate on pictures more often than in other school subjects, we can finally conclude: Such receptive and expressive aesthetic actions must not be an end in itself or pure educational methods regardless of the content dimension of RE. On the contrary, if they are connected to the development of the aesthetic dimension of religious competence, meaning the twofold capacity for perception and expression, they can be understood and concerted as a real trademark of RE giving justice to the principal "family alliance" (Clive Bell apud Wolterstorff, 2004, p. 328) between aesthetics and religion in general and the Catholic tradition in particular. Thus Catholic RE participates in the general task of evangelization, seeking "ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness." (Pope Francis, 2013, para. 41; especially on language: Altmeyer 2014) To this end, providing space for the impression of selected key media through medial reduction and educational retardation, as well as implementing an interplay between expressive and perceptive class actions seem to be two appropriate means.

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