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Doing Gender in Written Material and Text Books for Religious Education¹

Religious Education (RE) often works with text books and written material. Although books are losing importance as compared to visual and aural media they remain an integral component of RE. In Germany, RE books that are approved by church and State give a picture of what Christianity is. It is assumed that they contribute to religious socialization, though we don't have sufficient research in German on how text books really affect pupils, they strongly influence privately held theories and practices of teachers.²

In German-speaking countries there is some, albeit limited, discussion about gender issues in books and materials for RE in schools and in church.³ In my paper I don't go into details about specific books or different levels but I attempt to provide insights on what it means to look at books from different gender perspectives and to provide ideas to improve gender justice in RE. First I will present some important criteria and questions toward gaining more gender justice in RE books⁴. Secondly I will give two examples, focussing on girls' voices firstly and on gender roles secondly by analyzing the representation of Abraham and Sara. Finally I will draw conclusions and identify special challenges for the future.

1. Important criteria of gender justice in RE books

Beginning in the 1970s teachers and scholars started to question education and schools from a feminist point of view.⁵ In the 1980s the first investigations on the role

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² Dross 1991, 181 f.

³ I have noted about 20 articles, two master theses and one dissertation on gender and RE books. See references below.

⁴ In the following I will use the term "books" to include other written material as well.

⁵ The first results came out of the didactics of the so called main subjects, especially languages (German, English) and mathematics. RE followed in the late 80s and 90s.

of women and girls in RE text books appeared – done mainly by female students. The main issues were: discrimination of women /sexism and gender stereotypes in daily life and in biblical texts. Some short articles referred to the near-absence of women/girls in books and the stereotyped roles in which they appear- when at all. The questions reflect the political situation of movements for womens emancipation, equality and participation.

In 1988 Dagmar Andres published the first elaborated catalogue of criteria⁶ that were applied and modified later by different authors.⁷ Andres' criteria referred to pictures on the one hand and texts on the other hand, each of them analyzed in a quantitative and in a qualitative way. To obtain a feminist perspective, the questions were focused on women, to overcome patriarchal and andocentric (male centered) traditions in RE. Due to the limitation of space I will not go into details of the modifications but instead concentrate on some useful criteria that I currently see building on the process.⁸ I will also identify some challenges for the future.

(1) Participation of women and men in the conception of the book

At the beginning of the discussion, the participation of women was an issue - due to their absence. In most books today, there exists equal representation of men and women, but the problem of andocentrism is not resolved.

The current challenge is to integrate people with gender competence.

(2) Female and male authors of texts and illustrations

As recently as the 1980s it was rare to find either texts or illustrations authored by a woman. Today, there are far more.

But because there is a patriarchal tradition in theology and public expression, there remain far more texts and pictures from men in RE literature. Although womens' studies brought to light a lot about female writers and artists, women are not yet represented in the canon nearly as prominently as men are.⁹

Specifically, female theologians and texts of female theology are rare. In Germany one relies therefore mostly on Dorothee Sölle.

⁶ "Kriterien zur Erhebung sexistischer Tendenzen in Medien für Religionsunterricht und Katechese" (Andres 1988, 904 ff.).

⁷ For example a group of in-service trainers of RE in Germany (Ehrenfeuchter et al. 1990). These criteria aren't recognized officially but were and are used by people in the field. Used or modified by Oberle/Raske 1990; Gröger 1991; Pithan 1993, Volkmann 2004 and others.

⁸ The older criteria are still in use, because it takes time for new books to reach the schools, depending on their financial resources.

⁹ The younger the children are, the more texts or methodological ideas authored by women are found.

A challenge for the future is to integrate more new information about female traditions and about non hegemonic male and female authors, artists etc.

(3) Quantitative representation of women/men and girls/boys in texts and illustrations

In 1985 Florian pointed out that the ratio of women, either pictured, or as characters referred to in texts was 1:4. This ratio was comparable with that of children in the books, in fact it was somewhat lower than the representation of boys. Women mainly appeared in texts dealing with love and caregiving.¹⁰

A 2005 study by the Austrian teacher Elisabeth Duschet examined a new book with biblical stories for RE in primary school (1-4) and manuals for teachers published in 1997 to provide didactic and methodic suggestions and material for teachers for a new curriculum.¹¹ Although the manuals are Protestant-oriented, Duschet didn't find a single female pastor referred to (out of 6).

In pictures and illustrations women very often are pictured as smaller figures or at the margins. They are represented as marginal characters, so that they appear as less important.

Particularly in the chapters referring to bible texts far more male than female figures are found, due to its patriarchal concept and tradition. Many books refer to the fathers in faith (Erzväter) – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob etc. – or to Jesus and his male disciples. The bible appears as a story of a male God, peopled with men. In recent years, there has been more of an effort to adapt stories of women in the bible to be integrated in RE studies.

Silvia Arzt discovered that in reading the bible, girls identify more with female, and boys with male figures.¹² In RE books there is a lack of female figures for girls to orient themselves toward. Traditionally, girls are expected to take the male gender perspective and be empathic, as though boys don't need to learn empathy.

A current challenge is to increase the representation of non-white persons. Where they do exist, they mostly appear as Objects in need of help or evangelizing. Muslim girls appear as victims of patriarchal Muslim tradition and lend a stereotypical picture of Islam (and a superior image of Christianity).¹³

¹⁰ Florian 1985.

¹¹ Due to her research, the teachers' manuals are often used for RE classes (Duschet 2005, 27).

¹² Arzt 1999a and b; see also Wischer 2007.

¹³ See ex.g. Tworuschka 1986, 282.

(4) Gender Stereotypes

Questions to ask are: In which roles are female and male persons/characters presented? Which activities do they perform? Do you find women working outside their home, and/or men inside? Which are the roles, qualities and characteristics attributed to men, and which to women?¹⁴ Are women defined by men – as wives, daughters etc.? How do people behave between their own sex, how do they behave between different sexes? Is the relation hierarchical, violent, caring?

In the 80s gender roles were very stereotyped. As previously noted, women – when they appear at all - appear in a domestic context, as mothers and caregivers. Men appear as professionals, and as authorities in church and society.

Duschet confirms that women appear mainly in the domestic sphere. Very few are represented as professionals and are mainly occupied with reproductive activities. Professional (working) mothers are found only in “third world” countries, and so Duschet concludes that professionalism seems to be equated with misery.¹⁵ There are no single mothers or divorced women portrayed. Yet, in Austrian society every 7th family with children below 15 years is a single parent family (93 % are single mothers). 71% of all women and 83% of single mothers are working outside the house.¹⁶

Duschet examined how people fit in three pairs of oppositions that are classical gender stereotypes: emotional-rational, active-passive, and dominant-sub ordained.¹⁷ You find far more men than women in spheres of dominance and as experts, esp. in the field of religion. Women are mainly found in helping and care-giving roles.¹⁸ Duschet counts more than 50 percent male teachers at primary schools in the books, whereas in reality 80 percent of primary school teachers in Austria are female. In the book of bible stories she found no references to girls and women, nor to any female disciples or friends of Jesus.¹⁹

In general the manuals reflect traditional stereotypes of women and men in society, though the reality is that society is changing. Concerning boys and girls the relationship is more equal but girls don't appear much in active roles.

¹⁴ E.g.: Emotional vs. rational? Helping vs. Planning? Who is a professional or a decision maker? Who is working with technical instruments? Who has the money? Does the book define women through men?

¹⁵ Duschet 2005, 64.

¹⁶ Duschet 2005, 64.

¹⁷ Duschet asked for some special issues: 1. family and working life and the corresponding role models; 2. body and who is defined by body; 3. public/private space and who is appearing where (Duschet 2005, 28f).

¹⁸ Despite gender stereotypes you find a high rate of men listening empathically, relating to their role as experts (Duschet).

¹⁹ Duschet 2005.

The challenge is to deal with the tension between the representation of reality on the one hand and the need to create new visions on the other hand. That implies for example that research is needed to determine how or if girls/women were specifically involved in church history or bible texts.

(5) Inclusive language

In the 80s and 90s only andocentric/male language was used. This is a problem because in German male and female nouns are different. If you say “The disciples proclaimed the risen Lord” in German there are two different words for the English word disciples: Jünger (male) or Jüngerinnen (female).

The male word was or is taken as generic. Using the andocentric language the female is not represented in language and girls have to take the male/general perspective.²⁰ One might always ask if women are part of it or not. If the book says “Imagine you are a disciple (Jünger) of Jesus, what will you tell your friend (Freund)” you can ask: Should only boys imagine it? Girls should probably also participate, but they are not mentioned.

Another question concerning language is: Who is mentioned first, who second?

The ongoing challenge is to use inclusive language.

(6) Images and conceptions of God

In the 80s Florian counted 4 out of 234 references to God that were non-male. Many new books try to change the exclusively male references to God.

You mainly find two ways of enacting this change:

1. To insert a text of goddess- spirituality and relate it to the traditional patriarchal theology. 2. To integrate different images of God, mostly metaphors as fount or water of life.

The challenge is that God as mother and father very often implies traditional gender roles. It is important to find different, and pluralistic ways of referring to God.

(7) Reality check

Here you can ask: Which role models, which ways of life exist? Does the book show multi-faceted ways of living and performing different roles? Do we find single-, one-parent families, and homosexuals?

²⁰ e.g. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife.

The challenge is – and it goes for all the criteria – that it is a real art to select what is in a book. The book has to reflect reality and give evidence of gender justice but cannot be too overloaded.

(8) Identifying sexism

One can ask: Does the book refer to the patriarchal history of society, church and the bible?

This criteria was important in the beginning of the discussion. Today I think its usefulness depends on the context of the book as well as of a specific topic or issue.

(9) Integration of critical men's studies in all criteria

Until today nearly all women dealt with the problem of sexism and gender justice in RE books (and RE in general). Therefore I want to add a new perspective concerning the representation of boys/men in the book. Until now boys/men have been analyzed mostly in a feminist/sexism paradigm. I think it is important to include critical mens' studies and studies about boys' development in the analysis of gender and RE in books.²¹

The challenge is to analyze and produce books with a critical male perspective within a framework of gender justice.

2. Fe/male socialization and RE books – Two examples of analysis

I think the above-mentioned criteria and questions are useful but we also need to deepen more in a qualitative way. We need to integrate the pupil's development and life contexts (Lebenswelten). Therefore I will focus on two brief investigations I did myself.

2.1 Hearing women's voices – Books as resonant relationships²²

I remember very well my surprise when I prepared myself for a conference having planned to talk about women missing and being discriminated against in RE books. By reviewing new books I found more female figures and they didn't seem as

²¹ See part 2.2. In his brief review (erste Staatsexamensarbeit) Gottfried Hägele (2006) examines books for level 5/6, 7/8 and 9/10 (three books for each grade) asking, with a focus on boys: How does the book address them in their search for identity? Does the book deal with the issue of identity in a gender-specific way? 2. Which images of God/Jesus appear? 3. Which role models exist for boys? (Hägele 2006, 17) He didn't analyze the books in depth, but summarizes that: if they talk about humans being in God's image - they never ask what it means to be created as male and female. He acknowledges the effort to sometimes integrate more texts that deal with women, but concludes that the books leave young people alone in their struggle for gender identities.

²² See Pithan 1995.

stereotyped. I started to take a closer look at them by applying the developmental theory of Brown and Gilligan, and the picture changed completely.

As perhaps not everyone knows, I briefly summarize the investigations of Lyn Brown, Carol Gilligan and others. These researchers from Harvard University have interviewed girls throughout a longer period to gain insights about female development. The researchers confirm that girls, up until the age of 10 are often very courageous, say what they want and defend their opinions. As they enter adolescence their voices become more and more cautious and hesitant – often so much so that their voices are silenced.

The research project proves that girls in western cultures are facing a crisis of relationship. Girls do know what they want and feel and what is going on around them, but they are afraid to communicate it. They fear risking their relationships. The dilemma they are facing is whether they should follow their own voice and run the risk of losing their relationships with others (disconnection) or to follow the other's voices and lose the relationship to their own selves (dissociation).

A good example of this can be found in youth camps. Although there is an agreement that boys and girls will share the housework, the girls end up doing most of it. One girl is upset about it and confronts the boys. The boys refuse and often try to make her feel ridiculous. The girl can take her own view seriously - that she thinks the situation is unjust and that she wants to change it. She also realizes that women and their work are seen as inferior. She can defend her point of view, but runs the risk that the boys will not like her, and that other girls don't want to be identified with her. Perhaps even the camp's staff doesn't want to get into a confrontation with the boys and will see her as the trouble-maker. Or girl can also repress or reinterpret her own view and not voice it, saying for example: boys are silly; you can't win with them - and thus lose contact with her own voice and view.

Usually, girls make compromises between their own wishes and the wishes of others. They begin to live with a psychic split. Gilligan says: "They are left with two truths, two voices, two versions of a story." As a consequence they do not bring those feelings, attitudes, etc., into relationships that they really want to share: their brilliance, their creativity, their vitality – in order to protect themselves.²³ Gilligan calls this behavior a strategy of resistance and the girls' knowledge an "underground knowledge". Girls do not give up their own voices, but try to communicate them if possible. The researchers discovered that the phrases "you know" and "I don't know" are the key to accessing this underground: the coded language that girls use when they try to find out whether

²³ Gilligan does not consider this attitude as sheer negativity, but sees it as a protection against deprivation.

the other person is interested in their knowledge or not. They share their feelings and knowledge, depending on the interest they perceive in them from others. Gilligan maintains that it is important that women connect with girls and give resonance to the girl's ideas.

I think RE has to support girls in coping with the crises in relationships. It has to help them to discover and strengthen their own voices and body-selves and create situations where they can learn to strike a balance between their own needs and wants, and those of others.. There must be connectedness, and relationships that resonate.

What does this mean for RE books? I did an analysis²⁴ of a chapter about love and friendship in a book for level 7/8²⁵, asking: which female voices do we hear? Do they receive resonance? What kind of resonance?²⁶ Does the book support young women in resolving their relational crises? In this limited space, I can only provide a few highlights.

(1) Girls appear as “adjuncts” to or foils of the boys, who are in active roles. They don't speak for themselves, but react to what boys do. Girls are characterized by boys.

(2) Concerning dissociation, meaning a girl's alienation from her own voice: In one text a girl (Christiane F.) reports that she doesn't talk about her problems with her friends, because she doesn't want to lose them and so she tries to “be cool”. She typifies a girl who is aware of the conflict between her own feelings and ideas, and the need to be accepted by others, but cannot resolve it.

(3) Concerning disconnection: Another girl (Sibylle) is confronted with society's expectations that she be ‘a good girl’. She doesn't like it but finds she can only deal with it by rejecting the female and identifying herself with boys. This attitude will not help her to integrate her own experiences as a girl in society and the church.

Another girl (Michaela) first acts against dissociation. She knows about her feelings and tells a boy that she doesn't like his possessive and sexually aggressive behavior and she talks about it with her girlfriend Christa. Christa knows such experiences of sexual aggression as well but she tells her friend Michaela that it is not so important and boys are just like that. Christa is a girl already living with a psychic split.

²⁴ Pithan 1995.

²⁵ The issue of friendship is vitally important for both sexes and also because many female figures appear in the corresponding chapters. König (1993, 36) asked teachers what the favorite topics of girls and boys in RE in school are. According to the teachers girls prefer “love and friendship” and “dreams/stars” and (as a close second) care-giving. Boys like „church history“, „creation“ and „peace“.

²⁶ Chapter "Ich mag dich. Freundschaft und Liebe" of a widely-used book "Kursbuch",1991, for 7/8. (Kursbuch Religion. Neuauflage 7/8. Arbeitsbuch für den Religionsunterricht im 7./8. Schuljahr. Frankfurt am Main 1991, 141-150).

What are the consequences? First: There is no connectedness between the two girls. Second: There is a growing gap between their feelings and knowledge and their actual behavior. Third: It is a step away from authentic, towards idealized relations. In the long run the two friends will talk about what is not jeopardizing their relationship.²⁷ They won't talk about their experiences with boys, but instead discuss their conceptions of boys.²⁸

In this chapter, the bible and theology present an abstract concept of love and friendship (1 Cor 15). Gentility and diplomacy are important, but many girls need to learn how to express their wishes and anger in a direct way.²⁹

To sum up: This chapter deals with girls' relational crises: that they have either no voice or their voices are not heard. They ignore, deny or reinterpret their experiences and perceptions. Relations are focused on boys, and girls have to repress their own desires, needs and experiences in deference to (male) others, or of an abstract morality.

2.2 Doing or undoing gender – Abraham and Sara

In the 90s the paradigm shifted to gender relations – or theoretically to the question of doing and undoing gender. For this reason I examined books and material for RE in Sunday schools and in primary schools concerning Abraham and Sara.³⁰ Some insights:

Abraham is the main character. It is he who hears God's voice and promise. He leaves his land. He receives a son, etc. He is God's interlocutor; he is the possessor; he makes the decisions (those not made by God). To underline this point, in pictures he is very often found either alone or at the center.

What does this suggest for gender roles? Boys and girls become familiar with the idea of men as active figures. They learn to identify with men – seeing them as more important, the decision-makers, even in matters concerning women and children.

What about Sara? I found three representations: 1. She doesn't appear at all. 2. She is named as the mother of Isaac or as having given birth to him – a fact making her indispensable. 3. She is named as Abraham's wife, standing beside him or subordinated to him. Here is found: 1. Abraham informs her that he (or they) will go to a new land. 2. Abraham takes her (and others) with him. 3. Sara thinks it is natural to go with him. 4. She has doubts and questions him but he convinces her.

²⁷ Brown/Gilligan 1994, 11.

²⁸ Concerning 'connectedness,' girls become orientated towards boys and men. There are no resonant relationships for girls to relate to and no female role models of connectedness.

²⁹ Brown/Gilligan 1994, 193. See also Simmons 2003.

³⁰ See Pithan 1998.

This also implies a hierarchy: God-Abraham-Sara. She receives God's promise through Abraham.

Sometimes the story is told with the three angels coming to announce that Abraham and Sara will receive a son. They then mostly point out Sara's age and that she laughed when she heard the angel's message. It is Sara who doubts and is weak in her belief in God. (Remember we already know Abraham as faithful to God.) There isn't anything contained in the text about her good arguments and her experience, but the story goes on:

A son is born – that proves that Sara is either ridiculous or faithless, reinforced when the angels tell her that for God, nothing is impossible. If the angels ask about her laughter at their message, she denies having laughed.

What does this mean, that Sara's doubts, her age, and her not having given birth to a child are nowhere in evidence? Abraham is the trusting, faithful one.³¹ No mention is made about Abraham laughing at what is in Genesis 17, 17.

What can boys and girls learn? How do these stories do or undo gender?

Abraham can be seen as a prototype of male socialization, a socialization from which many boys suffer.³² He has to do something. He is not permitted to doubt or fear. He obeys God the father. He makes decisions for others. He trusts in God.

I suppose – and I think further research is needed – that boys have ambivalent feelings about these stories. Perhaps the stories are helpful by giving them hope and trust in God (who leads them to a new land). Or the stories distract them from their own feelings and an authentic communication with people and God.

Girls are encouraged to assume a male perspective, and begin to see man as hu-man. They tend to learn that it is better not to speak about their feelings or doubts. They begin to think that they are sub-ordained to men and that God speaks to them thru men.

These texts might reinforce a patriarchal context in church and school. Or – if family life tends not to be patriarchal – lead to estrangement from biblical texts.

In summation, I want to present some conclusions and identify some challenges.

³¹ Sara is the doubting, faithless person (sometimes you find menials as doubting persons).

³² In German there is an important book called "Little Heroes in Need" (Schnack/Neutzling 1990).

3. Conclusions and Challenges

1. There have been changes and movement towards more gender justice in RE books since the discussion began in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in making women more visible and in questioning sexism.
2. There is a non-synchronism, dealing with gender issues in RE and therefore a need for different perspectives of analysis. Quantitative perspectives are useful but not sufficient. We need deeper analysis and more fruitful discussions. Also needed is a discourse on different gender concepts, male/female and queer.
3. Research on male figures based on theories of masculinities is almost entirely non-existent. Just as female roles are changing, male roles are changing as well, and need to change in RE books.
4. Books and especially teachers' manuals should reflect more on learning strategies and methodology. Didactics and methods should be open to differences and provide gendered ways of teaching and learning. They should also encourage intervals of working in same-sex groups in order to make apparent both the differences between male and female groups and the differences among those in same-sex groups.
5. We need in-service training for teachers to gain gender competence and gender awareness to deal with material critically and creatively.
6. Further research is needed to acquire evidence on how books deal with gender issues and on how books influence or "communicate" with pupils as boys and girls.
7. The challenge lays in dealing with different tensions:

Does the book need to represent reality or to go beyond? For example: If you see women caring for children, this is reality but also a traditional gender role. If you see only business women it is not a real representation of women. If you see men caring for children will this be an unrealistic or a new role model?

Or: Does the reference to male/female strengthen the traditional symbolic order of the two sexes? Would it be better to deconstruct gender and sex and develop queer perspectives?

Or: If theology and the bible are patriarchal how can this be clear and how can new perspectives and other traditions be strengthened?

1. Gender is *one* perspective on books. Others include multiculturalism, different abilities and social justice.
2. A book does not change the world but gives views on a world that needs to be changed. DOING GENDER and UNDOING GENDER are therefore important.

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