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Experiencing Religion, Religious Experience and Media Experience
Explorations of an Intricate Relationship in the Context
of Religious Education

1 Introduction

It is of special significance that in the title of this book as well as in the title of my contribution "experiencing religion" is distinguished from "religious experience". I take it to be a consensus in religious education discourse across diverse models and concepts that it cannot be an educational aim of RE to generate "religious experience" in a strict sense. By religious experience in a strict sense I mean an understanding in terms of a substantial notion of religion, such as e.g. Stefan Huber has operationalized "religious experience" in his centrality-of-religiosity-scale (CRS) (Huber & Huber, 2012, 717):

- "How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that God or something divine intervenes in your life?
- How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that God or something divine wants to communicate or to reveal something to you?
- How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that God or something divine is present?"

To generate such religious experiences in class cannot be an objective of RE – not even of a confessional kind of RE such as still is dominant in Germany, because theologically speaking, such experiences are a gift by God that is not at a teacher's disposal, and under ethical and educational aspects religious experiences have to do with the inner intimate life of a child's or youngster's personality that should be respected as not to be intruded into.

What seems rather more moderate, ethically responsible and within the range of the methodical possibilities of teaching RE is to initiate *experiences of religion* – not just to get information about religion or religions, but to experience what religion in general or a specific religion in particular is about. However, experiencing what religion is all about includes experiencing what religious experience is about, because arguably religious experiences belong to the core of most religions. Still, in my view, it is important to distinguish between experiencing what religious experience may mean and *making* religious experiences. The test is whether the experience is open to someone without religious belief or with a different religious belief from the one that is the basis of the specific religious experience in question.

However, there are also different forms and concepts of religious experience. They have to do with the question of how experiencing religion is connected with religious experience. One model that has been called the liberal model and whose most prominent representative is Friedrich Schleiermacher (1799/2015) suggests that there are experiences that everybody can make that have a religious dimension or – to be more modest – suggest a religious interpretation.

My favourite example – that by the way already illustrates how useful popular media culture can be for theological discussion and religious education – is an episode from the absolutely secular German TV series "Powder Park" that I used to watch together with our then teenage daughter a couple of years ago. Powder Park told stories of a snowboard school in the Alpes in which extremely cool boys and sporty pretty girls had their little adventures. In one episode four of these cool boys are shown resting on a mountaintop before they will board down the hills. They are sitting on their boards and looking at the marvelous mountain landscape. Says one of them: "Isn't it an awesome panorama?" Says another one: "Yes, when you look at it, you almost feel like a rabbit's fart." – "Yes", agrees the third one. "When you see that, you could almost think there must be some higher power behind it." – The fourth boy frowns and asks him, "Smoked too much grass, have you?" Then the four take their snowboards and swoop downhill.

This a classical example of Schleiermacher's definition of a religious experience as perceiving the infinite in the finite – "there must be a higher power behind this" – and getting the feeling of ultimate dependence ("Gefühl der schlechthinnigen Abhängigkeit") – "you almost feel like a rabbit's fart". – I usually suggest to my students to memorize Schleiermacher's theory as the rabbit's fart theory of religion. – The episode also shows nicely that this experience triggers a religious interpretation, but is open to other interpretations as well ("smoked too much grass"). The decisive point is: It is a religious experience that comes about without prior experience of religion. It is rather a characteristic of every human to potentially make such self-transcending experiences, to be able to guess, to think and to ask beyond perceivable reality. And, this was Schleiermacher's argument, religion grows from such experiences that are accessible to everyone. Thus, religious experience is a precondition of experiencing religion.

There is hardly anyone else who challenged this liberal view of religious experience so fundamentally but Lutheran Yale Professor George Lindbeck in his book "The Nature of Doctrine" from 1984 (Lindbeck 1984). He turned the common sense liberal theory of religious experience upside down. Religious experience, in his view, comes about in the context of a religious community and its shared religious stories. These stories constitute the believers' worldview and guide their perception and interpretation of the world. Therefore religious experience is not something that comes about kind of naturally and is then subjected to religious interpretation, but the religious stories are the framework that generates specific experiences in the first place. That the world is a creation by a loving God can, in this view, be experienced only on the basis of the biblical creation story and the other stories of the Christian tradition. Experiencing religion thus is the precondition of religious experience.

Now, in my opinion, it doesn't make sense to oppose the two positions and decide which one is right and which is wrong. Rather it seems to me that they point to the conclusion that there are two different principle types of religious experience, one that is more grounded in the anthropological potential of human beings to transcend their world – which can be well elucidated by comparative religious studies research – and one that is more grounded in the symbolic universe humans have already created, called religion.

It is especially in the latter type of religious experience that not only extraordinary experiences but even more everyday life experiences and a gradual development play an important role. We know, for instance from the detailed analyses Hans Joas has offered on the genesis of values (Joas 2000), that for the development of religious faith in a person both factors are relevant: Distinctive extraordinary experiences that tend to challenge a person to change or make certain decisions on the one hand side and long-term socializing experiences that rather promote a gradual development on the other.

I don't want to follow the phenomenological, philosophical and theological questions here any further, but will rather concentrate on the connection these deliberations have with media culture and media experiences. It is my hypothesis that all these types of religious – or, rather, transcendental – experience can be found in popular media culture and that experiencing religion also takes place there. With this hypothesis I want to challenge a presupposition that is often made in the German-speaking RE discourse, especially in the context of the so-called performative approach to RE. It is the presupposition that many children and youngsters in our RE classes nowadays tend to be completely ignorant in respect of religion. For instance, my appreciated colleague Bernhard Dressler, has described the pupils of RE classes as "tabulae rasae", as "blank sheets" when it comes to religion, and he has used the metaphor of the RE teacher as a tourist guide who has to introduce his or her pupils into a completely unknown territory (Dressler 2009). In my opinion, such an estimation not only devalues the capacities of children and youngsters to

make religious experiences of the first type, ask religious questions and develop their own thinking about God and the meaning of the world, but it also underestimates the presence of religious dimensions and religious traditions in general culture, especially in the popular media culture that has become a substantial part of young people's life world.

In the following I will try to develop my hypothesis and by doing so also address some questions that are raised by it. What is the anthropological and cultural-historical basis for the relationship between religion and the media? In what way is religion transformed by the influence of media culture? How can the interrelation between religion and present digital media culture be judged from a theological and educational perspective? What does the influence of media culture mean for the religious socialization and education of young people?

I will start with anthropological and cultural-historical perspectives.

2 'Homo Medialis' and 'Religio Medialis' – Anthropological and Cultural-Historical Perspectives

Although anthropological perspectives on Western media culture reach back to the 1940s, it seems that Media Anthropology as a special academic field has emerged mainly since the 1990s. In her introductory text to the book "Media Anthropology" (Rothenbuhler & Coman 2005) Faye Ginsburg traces the explicit beginning of this new interdisciplinary academic field back to that decade (Ginsberg 2005, 17). One indicator of its rising importance may be seen in the foundation of the "Media Anthropology Network" in 2008 by which the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) aims to foster international discussion and collaboration around the anthropology of media. In the German language context, where anthropology tends to be conceived still more in philosophical terms than in the English context, renewed reception of Ernst Cassirer's "Philosophy of Symbolic Forms" (1923–1929, in English: 1953–1957) has been particularly influential. Cassirer's basic idea is that man – as he put it in his more popular book "Essay on Man" (1944) – is a "symbolic animal". Whereas animals perceive their world by instincts and direct sensory perception, humans create a universe of symbolic meanings in which they live and by which they, in turn, are shaped. For Cassirer language, myth, religion, science and art are the characteristic basic forms of human culture that are created and developed by the use of symbolic signs. By using them humans make meaning of their life and their world.

In his philosophical "media ethics" Klaus Wiegerling has transferred Cassirer's symbolic theory to the media as mediators of communication. Consequently, Wiegerling holds that man is not only facing the medium but is himself "interwoven into the medium, into the language that he passes on, varies and transforms, into the image that he perceives and produces. Even more, the human person

proves to be constituted by media, he lives on the medium of language as well as the medium of image, he uses medial artefacts, from clay tablets to modern computers, in order to express whatever moves him, to communicate and conserve it, to liberate it from being tied to a random physical location. Media are transcending machines that expand human possibilities of expression and partly liberate humans from contingencies." (Wiegerling 1998, 234; my translation). From the very beginning, we might summarize, *homo sapiens* has at the same time been a *homo medialis* (Pirner & Rath 2003). This implies that human self-understanding is always informed and influenced by the media people use. For instance, after the invention of writing the experience of community changed, because in addition to the bodily co-presence it now encompassed shared thoughts, ideas and feelings over temporal or local distances. And in Wiegerling's description of the media as "transcending machines" there is already a hint to their special significance for the religious realm.

In line with Cassirer and Wiegerling we can say that right from the start *homo religiosus*, too, has been a *homo medialis*. In two significant ways media play an indispensable role in religions: On the one hand, the invisible reality of the divine, of spirits or demons has to be represented by symbolic, medial forms in order to become 'real'; the first Stone Age cave drawings give examples of such religious media worlds. On the other hand, religious experiences – e.g. encounters with God or revelations by divine powers – must be medialized so that they can be preserved, communicated to others, disseminated to many and passed on to the next generations. It should be noted that in this second case, it is mostly inner invisible realities that are made accessible and communicable with the help of media. And, as Jörg Lauster has lucidly demonstrated for Christianity, religious tradition in this context does not only mean that certain faith contents or doctrines are passed on to the knowledge of the next generation, but the ultimate aim of the medialization of religious experiences in written narratives, in artwork, in music or architecture is *to evoke the same kind of religious experiences in the recipients* (Lauster, 2005).

Against this background, it is understandable that in the history of human culture it has repeatedly been the medium itself that was attributed supernatural or divine power because of its potential to disclose religious realities or evoke religious experiences. For example, in ancient religions images and statues were often regarded to virtually incorporate the divine, and in revelation religions the written word and the book as a medium have tended to be assigned a sacred dimension. On the other hand, the dominance of certain kinds of media has always had an influence on religions of that time, and also on the kinds of religious experiences. Revelation religions would not have been possible without the cultural achievement of writing, and the Protestant Reformation would hardly have been possible without the invention of the printing press.

In cultural history, the religious potential of media or cultural products reached a special stage when in the Modern Era whole sections of culture, such as art, liter-

ature and education became autonomous and independent from religion. As a consequence of this emancipation process, the tradition of religious experiences and a religious interpretation of the world was passed on and was further developed not only in the sphere of institutionalized religions and under their direction any longer but also *outside* them and independently from them in the newly generated free cultural space. It was and is possible now to experience the originally religious emotions and religious power without its religious context. Musical compositions of a "mass" are performed in secular concert halls, religious artwork is exhibited in secular museums, and religious stories are made into Hollywood films. This emancipation of culture from institutionalized religion, as you might call it, has come to be the precondition that has facilitated individual kinds of religiosity and spirituality that are independent from churches or other religious institutions. As we shall see, it has also made it possible that the modern media have taken over some functions from religion, and that people use modern media to meet their spiritual needs, apart from religion. As American sociologist Robert Wuthnow argued, a decisive transformation of religion along this line took place in the course of the 20th century, namely the massive popularization of religion and spirituality through the mass media that provided "access" for almost all people to the sacred and to different kinds of religions and worldviews beyond the local congregation. This development, he contended, considerably contributed to destabilizing people's religiosity and promoted a kind of seeking or quest religiosity (Wuthnow 1998). However, it could also be argued that especially the digital age of the internet has led to a new scope of accessibility of diverse spiritualities and religious experiences that also has the potential of a renewed intensity.

What preliminary conclusions can be drawn from these insights for theological and educational perspectives?

1) In light of the high and fundamental significance that media have for religions in general and for Christianity in particular, it would seem illogical for theologians as well as for RE teachers to adopt a wholesale critical attitude towards the (digital) media and to advocate only unmediated 'direct' kinds of experience. Rather, there seem to be striking analogies between the symbolic-medial construction of religious 'parallel worlds' in past and presence and the digitally constructed virtual realities of our time.

2) In face of the interconnectedness of media and humans in general, and media and religion in particular, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of a specific media culture in order to fully understand the religion and the specific kinds of religious experiences in it. The anthropological perspective implies not just focusing on "religion" in a phenomenologically narrow sense but to look at basic concepts of humanity and how they are informed by media culture: identity, community, social relationship and others.

3) In face of the interconnectedness of media and religion, it is quite clear that it is religious traditions and theological discourse that show a rich potential for deal-

ing competently and critically with various media. In the Jewish-Christian tradition we can think of the Old Testament ban on images (Exodus 20, 4), the Iconoclastic Controversy of the Middle Ages and the Reformation Period as well as the ongoing dispute on the literal inspiration of the Bible by God. In all these cases the crucial question is how the line between the Divine and the worldly, human products of images or writings can be drawn, or in other words, how an appropriate appreciation of the media can be reached that at the same time avoids their overestimation or even deification. It is my conviction that only on the basis of accepting the medial constitution of the human being as *homo medialis* and of realizing the indispensable medial dimension of religion can theology and religious education competently and critically address the questions of how symbolic-medial and social-personal realities can and should be related and what media culture can contribute to an educated, responsible kind of religiosity.

3   Media and Religion – Sociological and Psychological Perspectives

Religious Elements and Dimensions of Media Culture

Over the past decades, numerous hermeneutic and analytical studies from various scholarly disciplines have analyzed religious or quasi-religious elements and structures in popular media culture (for recent analyses see e.g. Chidester 2005; Clark & Clanton 2012; Cobb 2005; Forbes & Mahan 2017; Lynch 2005; Mazur & McCarthy 2010; Santana & Erickson 2016). One of the classical examples and object of numerous studies is the "Matrix" film trilogy (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999, 2003, 2003).

Studies that analyze such analogies between media culture and religion(s) usually employ a phenomenological notion of religion such as the one developed by the Scottish religious studies scholar Ninian Smart (1973). Smart defined six dimensions of religion, the doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, and institutional. Except for the doctrinal and the institutional dimensions all the others have been shown to have analogies in media culture. Many media narratives are structured like mythical narratives; they convey certain ethical values; plunging into the media world of a movie or a computer game resembles taking part in a religious ritual enabling the participant to make extraordinary experiences that may have transformative power.

There is, however, yet another way in which media culture relates to religion that can also be exemplified by the Matrix movies. They may be seen as critically reflecting the present state of our world and even of the state of reality in this world. They may help their viewers to think about their own role in this world, their identity. And an episode like the famous resurrection scene in "The Matrix"

may convey some feeling of hope that even utter desperate situations are no reason for final resignation but can be overcome.

In these terms, the media story fulfills functions that are often ascribed to religion. German sociologist Franz-Xaver Kaufmann (1989) has elaborated six functions religion can have for a society and individuals that have become classical:

1) Religion helps to deal with fear and other fundamental emotions;
2) it offers patterns of action for extra-ordinary life situations;
3) it helps to cope with the contingencies of life (injustice, pain, misfortunes, illness, death);
4) it promotes social integration (legitimates community and social behavior);
5) it offers a cosmology (a meaning of the world that overcomes senselessness and chaos);
6) it enables distance from the world (allows to take a stance from afar; promotes resistance and protest against injustice and immorality).

Quite a number of studies from sociology, media studies as well as from religious studies and theology have shown that indeed media culture has to a large extent taken over these and other functions for modern societies and their people from religion (see e.g. Fiske 2010; Pirner, 2001; Real 1989; Silverstone 1981; Thomas 1998). Popular media narratives deal with people's fundamental emotions, with extraordinary life situations, with the great human questions of contingency; media promote social integration by facilitating social communication and generating mainstream topics; news, documentaries, but also narrative media genres like science fiction offer an explanation and meaningful interpretation of the world; and the media enable us to gain distance from the world by looking at it from different angles and through different medial lenses, by observing the world as a whole – an aspiration that is symbolized in almost every news broadcast.

I would like to add another function beyond the ones of Kaufmann that has repeatedly been proved to be one of media culture. Analyses of it draw mainly on Thomas Luckmann and Jörg Lauster. They point out that religion offers hightened, intensified experiences (of "transcendence", Luckmann 1970) and thus enriches life by the "enchantment" of the world ("Verzauberung der Welt", Lauster 2014). Today, it is the movies, the pop concert or the digital game that provides intensified experiences and enchant our world.

Of course it should be noted that in media culture such functions have a different connotation from traditional religion. They are usually embedded into media formats whose primary intentions can be characterized by entertainment and information. This transforms the experiences of religion and also religious experiences in a characteristic way. It is possible to make such experiences with a potentially high emotional intensity and at the same time without the interpretive content, the seriousness and commitment of a religious context. As most religious art when it leaves the religious context such media-cultural elements become open to ambigui-

ty and to a plurality of modes of reception. When you listen to a deeply religious cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach, you can simply enjoy its aesthetic quality, you can enjoy its emotional quality, you can even enjoy feeling the spiritual aura it conveys – without being a religious person. You can, as an agnostic friend once put it, decide to imagine being a Christian for the moment of the concert.

So, perhaps it is worthwhile thinking about the presence of religious elements and religious dimensions in media culture as analogous to religious education in a pluralist society. In Christian religious education that addresses not only committed Christians, but a variety of different religious and nonreligious students, it will be advisable to offer experiences of religion and maybe also religious (or transcendental) experiences that are not fixed to the religious interpretation but are also open to other modes of reception, that are open to different ways of accessing them and interpreting them. In such a perspective, religion in media culture may offer promising subject matters of religious education.

Yet, the functions of religion, and the power of religious experience, can of course also be used and misused for different purposes. Throughout history religion and its functions have been misused for political indoctrination. And in the context of popular culture they may additionally be used for economic manipulation and commercial interests – as examples from commercials can show.

Consequently, what is also needed in religious education are critical analyses of how media culture deals with religion and how the power of religious experiences is used for problematic aims (see e.g. Pirner & Lähnemann 2013). However, in my view, in many examples from commercials and popular culture, there is not just a misuse of religious symbols but the religious symbols are also kind of revitalized on an effectual level: Often with a twinkling of an eye, religious symbols are used, because they are trusted to still evoke deep existential desires and feelings in the recipients.

However, up to now, we have mainly concentrated on the phenomena and contents of media culture. What is missing is the perspective on how people, especially children and young people deal with them. Subsequently, some major results and very few examples from the meanwhile quite multifaceted empirical research in this field are presented.

Empirical Research on the Relationship between Media Use and Religiosity[10]

1) Young people use media experiences for constructing their worldviews and religious ideas in a kind of religious or worldview self-socialization. Thus the media influence their views of life, the world and of religion.

For instance, the qualitative study of Hanisch (1996) on the development of children's ways of picturing God shows that some children use pictures from cow-

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10 For a more detailed account see Pirner 2012b.

boy or war films to draw their image of God (Hanisch 1996, 128), and Freuden-berger-Loetz (2006, 187) found that some children refer to ghost films when they try to express their ideas of life after death.

Based on George Gerbner's cultivation theory (Gerbner 1984) and building on a Scottish study done by Harry Gibson (1992) I conducted a quantitative investigation among 302 German 14-15 year-olds (Pirner 2009b) that my colleague Stephan Kröner and I have been able to replicate recently among 249 young people of the same age and that has again been replicated with an enlarged research design by Michael Haas (2015, chapter 7.1.5) among 679 youths. The youngsters in our study were asked about their TV preferences including genres such as mystery, horror and fantasy films, and about a range of para-religious and religious ideas and attitudes. The studies showed several significant correlations between TV preferences and religious orientation, mostly clustering around the genres horror and mystery and becoming slightly stronger when differentiated by sex: For instance, in our replication study from 2012 those girls who showed a preference for horror or mystery films were significantly more likely to believe in ghosts ($r_{Pearson} = .28^{**}$) and in possible contact with the dead ($r_{Pearson} = .24^{*}$) than the others. There was also a correlation between mystery or horror preference and belief in aliens among the boys, whereas preference for information and news shows correlated negatively with para-religious beliefs among girls and boys. A quite plausible interpretation of these results can be based on the cultivation theory perspective that the strongest effects of television on viewers can be expected in those cases where television reality differs most from everyday reality, which obviously applies for the fantastic film genres. In horror and mystery films mostly wicked supernatural powers and extra-terrestrial beings play an important role. On the other hand, it is also quite intelligible that information genres contribute to an enlightened, rational view of the world and thus hamper the development of para-religious beliefs. There were no correlations with traditional religious views. Obviously, these views are still very much determined by the family and the social context.

The reported results from quantitative investigations can be supported by the findings of some qualitative studies. In her book *From Angels to Aliens*, Lynn Schofield Clark reports about her study that is based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with about 100 American teenagers (Clark 2003). During the research process she was lead to concentrate on the supernatural in the media, which means that she focused on precisely those film genres that showed the most and highest significant correlations in our investigation. Clark concludes that the media can clearly be seen as one source of religious identity formation among young people today and that this source becomes increasingly important for those young people "with the least interest in formal religion." (Clark 2003, 224).

Also, Clark's results reaffirm the view that the relationship between media and religious beliefs is not simply one of media effects but a more complex, reciprocal, and multi-faceted one having to do with what she calls "the blurring of boundaries"

between the stories of traditional religion and those of popular media culture (Clark 2003, 230). Relying mainly on the young people's self-interpretation, she emphasizes the tendency that the media stories are not taken seriously by the young viewers and that most of them "do not consciously seek information about the supernatural from the media." (Clark 2003, 227). Just as our own findings Clark's results can challenge the teenagers' conviction that "they are unlikely to have their minds changed about what they do believe" by the media (Clark 2003, 227f.).

2) For young people media experiences can have transcendental, transformative dimensions that come near to religious experiences.

In 2007 Astrid Dinter published an ethnographic study on adolescents' use of computers. She found that general user experiences (e.g. feelings of flow or omnipotence) as well as the contents of some computer games (e.g. 'God Games' in which the user adopts the role of God) can imply religious dimensions in a wide sense (Dinter 2007).

3) Young people use the media with religious elements for constructing existential meaning in their lives – but not necessarily religious meaning.

A team of researchers around German Practical Theologian Wilhelm Gräb (Gräb et al. 2006) interviewed young adults directly after watching certain popular movie films. They wanted to find out whether these people used the films for a kind of meaning-making that is analogous to religion. The results show that this indeed is the case; the films clearly were interpreted by the interviewees in a way to answer their own existential questions on life and the world. However, the study also revealed that religious allusions, religious symbols and religious narrative structures in the films were mostly not recognized by the audience and did not interest them much. Rather they tended to use even films with very explicit religious dimensions to develop their own interpretations, while their nonreligious attitude remained unchanged (Gräb et al. 2006, 293-4). It is interesting to see that a British study with a comparable design arrived at much the same conclusion, namely that the young people "derive meaning from popular culture but not religious meaning" (Savage et al. 2006, reported by Collins-Mayo & Beaudoin 2010, 23).

4) Media experiences can sometimes offer bridges to experiencing religion and religious experience.

Building on Gräb et al., Jörg Herrmann (2007) conducted biographical interviews with 20 young adults on possible religious aspects in their reception of television, movie films, and books. Many of the interviewees seemed to use the media as a source of dealing with the existential, moral and religious questions of life. Mostly this media use appeared to constitute a functional equivalent of religion that substitutes religion, but sometimes the media also seemed to offer bridges to religion. For instance, Herrmann reports the case of 39-year-old Hans, whose regular viewing of the TV series "Kung Fu" in his adolescence had led him to read books on Buddhism, attend seminars, and practice Buddhist meditation up to the present day (Herrmann 2007, 257).

5) Media experiences can legitimate community, offer a cosmology and enable distance from the world.

This can especially be demonstrated by studies in the field of TV fan clubs and youth cultures. It seems obvious that whenever media users identify strongly with a certain TV series or film, watch it regularly and enthusiastically, and form social communities around it, this media product's influence on its fans can be expected to be especially strong. The probably most prominent example of this is the fan community of the American science fiction TV series "Star Trek". On internet sites or in fanzines in the USA as well as in Germany some of them 'confess' that Star Trek has literally changed their life and helped them through troubles and depression, and that Star Trek "was and will always be the most significant influence in my life" (Jewett & Lawrence 1977, 30; see also Hellmann & Klein 1997, 25-44). In particular, the TV series seems to convey a positive, hopeful utopian perspective that in the future all nations and peoples can live together in freedom, peace, mutual respect and helpfulness. This includes respect for the other's religion or non-religious worldview.

Similar findings could be presented from research on media-guided youth cultures. I will only mention here that we have done some research on the Gothic scene and on Hip Hop culture (Pirner 2015; 2014). It is interesting to see how in the Gothic scene existential reflectiveness that includes thinking about death and dying, as well as a high sensitivity for spiritual questions and needs belong to the central characteristics. Also, Gothics take a critical stance against the superficial mainstream society as well as against superficial mainstream popular culture.

6) The effects of media experiences are to a great extent determined by the individuals' predispositions and their close social context.

Some recent experimental studies demonstrate that the tendencies of findings in media violence research, also apply to religious aspects in the media: The way in which religion in the media is perceived, and consequently which effects media have on religious views, seems to depend much on the predisposition of the recipient. Zywek (2007) showed the film "The DaVinci Code", based on Dan Brown's bestselling book, to 58 Persons, about half of them practicing Catholics, the other half non-Catholics or agnostics. In a prae-post design (interviews before and after the film) it turned out that, faced with the church-critical tendencies of the film, the pro-Church attitude of the Catholics was reinforced while the non-Catholics and agnostics regarded the church clearly as more negative after the film.

Such findings support the hope that education can have an influence on media use and media reception. Religious education can be seen to offer a socially relevant learning context that can stimulate pupils to modify their predispositions in regard to media use and experience.

4   Conclusion

As a conclusion I will present seven theses that are intended to provoke and stimulate discussion. They constitute the basis of the "Media Culture Approach to Religious Education" that I have been developing over the past 15 years (Pirner, 2001; 2009a; 2012a).

(1) Anthropological perspectives and empirical research have shown that young people even from nonreligious backgrounds in our western societies are not "blank sheets" when it comes to religion. They are likely to have encountered and experienced elements of religion and religious perspectives in popular media culture. And they are likely to make sense of their own existential questions and spiritual needs by drawing on media culture and their peer and youth cultures. The primary task of religious education is not to introduce young people into a completely unknown territory, but to accompany und critically support them in their self-socialization.

(2) A more appropriate hermeneutic paradigm for understanding the role of media culture in young people's lives than secularization is pluralization. The secularization perspective in religious education understands people's use of media culture as a deficit compared to the use of traditional religion. The pluralization perspective understands people's use of media culture as expression of their resources and increased freedom of choice in forming their own life-styles. As long as we look for traditional religious language among young people we may find them deficient; as soon as we take into account that, drawing on popular culture, they might have developed their own language in dealing with existential questions and spiritual needs, we might discover their resources. The objective of RE can and should be to help young people to self-reflectively develop their resources further by getting into an exchange with cultural resources from traditional religion.

(3) Consequently, the appropriate analogy for theologically dealing with media culture in religious education is not the evangelization of the pagans but interreligious dialogue and learning. Religious education could serve as a context, in which the great questions of life can be discussed with a primary reference to the great answers from traditional religion, but in an open debate. Young people who use media culture or their specific youth culture to deal with those questions can learn a lot from e.g. the Christian perspective and how its transformations may be part of their culture; they may get stimulated to reflect and modify their attitudes and lifestyle. Vice versa, young Christians and the Christian teacher may learn a lot about why other young people prefer their youth culture or the media to traditional Christianity; they also may get stimulated to reflect or even modify their attitudes and Christian life style.

However, it should be taken into account that, different from other traditional religions, spirituality in media culture and youth cultures often takes on experimental, provocative, syncretistic and para-religious shapes. To some extent, they mirror the situation of religion in a post-secular society, but they can also be inter-

preted as being part of a "liminal" space in which young people can find their way in the transitional process from childhood to adulthood and from their family traditions into an open, pluralistic society. From a psychological and educational perspective, such liminal experimental spaces for young people have their own right and should, in principle, be treated with respect. This does not exclude criticism in concrete cases, for instance, of right-wing extremism.

(4) The wide range of analogies and links between traditional religion and media culture allows religious education to draw on media culture in its effort to facilitate experiences of religion and even promote the understanding of religious experiences. In media culture many decontextualized elements from religions can be found; recontextualizing them in religious education can stimulate multidimensional learning processes in pupils in which they learn more about themselves, about our culture and about religion. And the open and multidimensional character of transcendental experiences in media culture may help religious education to look for similar kinds of stagings: offering experiential settings that are open to various kinds of interpretation in an effort to strengthen the subjectivity and freedom of RE students.

(5) Religious education has many legitimate and useful objectives and dimensions even for hard-core fans of media culture or a specific youth culture. It can help trace the religious traditions and specific worldviews that determine it. It can draw attention to risks of manipulation and self-deception as well as problematic contents in media culture (see e.g. Pirner & Lähnemann 2013). In short, it can offer criteria from philosophical and theological ethics that can be applied to media culture and youth cultures. It can thus help young people to live their life style more reflectively, more self-critically and maybe also in a richer way. However, this will only be credible and plausible, if the same criteria that are applied to media culture are applied to religion, e.g. Christianity in Christian RE, as well. For instance, we cannot critically talk about media violence if we don't talk about violence in the traditional Christian media, the Bible and Christian art. We cannot critically talk about loss of reality in media worlds, if we don't talk about loss of reality in religious worlds. We cannot talk critically about the problematic effects of omnipresent superficial media entertainment without talking about the entertaining dimensions of religion and thus recognizing the anthropological foundations of entertainment.

(6) On the one hand, the analysis of media culture and youth cultures confirms the importance of personal experience and autonomy for young people. However, on the other hand, the increased possibilities that the digital media offer to create or stimulate extraordinary experiences also relativize the significance of such extraordinary experiences for young people's lives and their spiritual development. And the continuous freedom of choice can also be felt as a burden by young people. Thus, as a kind of counter-reaction that we can observe especially in youth cultures, reliable trustful relationships, slow but sustained developments and transfor-

mations, and orientation in a community of like-minded people seems to gain importance. This points to the opportunities religions still may have among young people, if religions open up to their needs, their ideas and their often experimental, unconventional life-styles. In religious education, therefore, besides relating to media culture, alternative, less medial forms of learning, life practice and elementary experience should also be offered, for instance, by meditation exercises or by directly encountering nature.

(7) It is my conviction that (public) religious education, as school education in general, should regard it as one major task to support and accompany the self-socialization processes of young people in a critical and constructive way. In reference to media culture this requires interrelating perspectives from religious education and from media education in a fruitful way and, at schools, to integrate media education into RE as well as into other school subjects so that media education and religious education can complement each other (Pirner, Pfeiffer & Uphues 2013).

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