Anthropology and Religious Formation

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Anthropology—in the German sense of the term—means an interdisciplinary research project. Anthropology answers the question: how can we understand humanity if no longer through the lens of classical metaphysics? A crucial insight of twentieth and twenty-first century research has been that humans are by nature predetermined to learn through culture how to live. In this sense, humans by nature require education and formation to develop human opportunities. Humans not only come into the world "unfinished" and therefore dependent on culture as a kind of second nature. Humans also learn in a specific way: everyone builds on the experiences of their ancestors, so that each individual does not have to repeat those experiences. Not everyone has to reinvent the wheel. Anthropological research in the last few decades has shown that this human ability to learn culture from others is distinctive.

In the following, I first present anthropological research from the last few decades that supports this thesis. We will come to see in what sense we can say that humans by nature require education and formation, how human learning takes place, and how humanity's approach to culture leads to a plurality of cultures. Whoever claims that humans are by nature oriented towards culture is claiming at the same time that human nature cannot be described in an essentialist way.

In the second part of this chapter, I ask what religious education contributes to general human learning. My thesis is that religious education has to do with orientational knowledge, which shows human beings their true vocation (*Bestimmung*). Nature does not teach us what the ultimate purpose of human life is. Religious education and formation attempt to do so. Thereby, religious formation raises our awareness that humanity always falls short of its vocation.

The Shift from Natural Evolution to Cultural Development

In the history of humanity, natural evolution reaches a tipping point when it begins to shift and becomes a cultural process. As a consequence, the dynamics of change accelerate dramatically.[1] A simple consideration illustrates that the rise of modern humanity cannot be described in biological terms only:

> The fact is, there simply has not been enough time for processes of biological evolution involving genetic variation and natural selection to have created, one by one, each of the cognitive skills necessary for modern humans to invent and maintain complex tool-use industries and technologies, complex forms of symbolic communication and representation, and complex social organizations and institutions.[2]

As a result, we need to ask when and how natural evolution shifts to cultural development in such a way that the dynamics of change accelerate rapidly. In this endeavor, we first need to keep in mind that the origins of human culture are already prefigured in the evolution of living organisms. Every living organism not only adapts to the environment but also contributes to the shape of the environment—thus, in a sense, creating it. However, we also cannot ignore the extraordinary character of human culture and its genesis. Human culture must be described in terms of both continuity and discontinuity with the behavior of other living organisms in general.

According to Charles Darwin, the decisive difference is located at the level of the cognitive, even if this is only a gradual process. While human cognitive capabilities are the result of a long evolutionary process, what distinguishes humans from other living organisms—primates especially—seems to be the capability for cultural learning. Humans "can learn not just *from* the other but *through* the other."[3] For this reason, humans can build on what has been learned in previous generations. This unique procedure of "cultural transmission" creates a "ratchet effect"[4] that speeds up cultural developments immensely. In this way, cultural development is decoupled from natural processes.

To learn "*through* the other" means, in an elementary sense, to learn by imitating the other's physical behavior. In humans, this form of imitation appears especially pervasive, as the phenomenon of so-called overimitation

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1 Cf. Gregor Etzelmüller, "The Lived Body as the Tipping Point Between an Evolutionary and a Historical Anthropology," in *Embodiment in Evolution and Culture*, ed. Gregor Etzelmüller and Christian Tewes (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2016), 205–25.

2 Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2.

3 Ibid., 6.

4 Ibid., 4.

demonstrates.[5] It has been observed only in human children but occurs in all cultures.[6] Starting at about age three, toddlers tend to imitate another's action "overly precisely."[7] In contrast to chimpanzees, for example, toddlers imitate even those aspects that are obviously causally irrelevant for reaching the goal. An experiment by Horner and Whiten often referred to in this context demonstrates this with great force.

> Young wild-born chimpanzees from an African sanctuary and 3- to 4-year-old children observed a human demonstrator use a tool to retrieve a reward from a puzzle-box. The demonstration involved both causally relevant and irrelevant actions, and the box was presented in each of two conditions: opaque and clear. In the opaque condition, causal information about the effect of the tool inside the box was not available, and hence it was impossible to differentiate between the relevant and irrelevant parts of the demonstration. However, in the clear condition causal information was available, and subjects could potentially determine which actions were necessary. When chimpanzees were presented with the opaque box, they reproduced both the relevant and irrelevant actions, thus imitating the overall structure of the task. When the box was presented in the clear condition they instead ignored the irrelevant actions in favour of a more efficient, emulative technique. . . . In contrast to the chimpanzees, children employed imitation to solve the task in both conditions, at the expense of efficiency.[8]

Children imitate the action that is obviously causally irrelevant, even if they assume that they are not observed or if they are encouraged to reach the goal in such a way as makes sense to them. Lyons and colleagues demonstrated that in many cases, children imitate an action with high precision, even if this constitutes a disadvantage in a competitive situation: "children will continue to overimitate even when doing so imposes motivationally salient costs."[9]

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5 I am grateful to Stefanie Höhl (University of Vienna) for the literature referenced in the following.

6 Tom Froese and David A. Leavens, "The Direct Perception Hypothesis: Perceiving the Intention of Another's Actions Hinders its Precise Imitation," *Frontiers in Psychology* 18 (2014): 2.

7 Stefanie Hoehl [Höhl], et al., "The Role of Social Interactions and Pedagogical Cues for Eliciting and Reducing Overimitation in Preschoolers," *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* (2014): 122–33, at 122.

8 Victoria Horner and Andrew Whiten, "Causal Knowledge and Imitation/Emulation Switching in Chimpanzees (Pan troglodytes) and Children (Homo sapiens)," *Animal Cognition* 8/3 (2005): 164–81, at 164.

9 D.E. Lyons, et al., "The Scope and Limits of Overimitation in the Transmission of Artefact Culture," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society London B: Biological Sciences* 366 (2011): 1158–67, at 1163.

In addition, toddlers imitate even actions not demonstrated intentionally—that is, in a pedagogic context or by trusted care givers:

> Interestingly, and in contrast to our prediction, children initially reenacted the irrelevant actions no matter whether these actions were demonstrated by a pedagogical experimenter or by an unfamiliar and non-communicative experimenter. This was true even though the no-contact experimenter never interacted with children and avoided any contact before or during the experiment.[10]

Human children seem to assume that an action performed by a parent or a care giver, or by any adult person in general, is meaningful, even if they do not see or understand its point. The child imitates these actions as exactly as possible precisely because it does not see the point.

> On this view, and in direct contrast to the traditional view of imitation, understanding the other's goals and intentions does not facilitate imitation, but actually hinders it because such direct insight obscures the precise means. Imitation requires individuals to change attention from *what* the other's goals are to *how* the other's actions are precisely realized, while emulation is possible without this extra effort.[11]

Accordingly, it is not the recognition of the other as an intentional actor[12] that is foundational for the specifically human mode of learning by imitation, but the assumption of there being a point to imitation, in the sense of a leap of faith. Humans assume that others' actions are meaningful even if their actions do not seem so at first glance.

That this assumption of meaning amounts to a leap of faith is demonstrated by experiments in which toddlers are confronted with a conflict. They are presented with two different courses of action and then need to decide which strategy to pursue.

> After being shown two strategies, they chose to maintain the strategy or switch to the strategy employed by the pedagogical experimenter (pedagogical-then-no-contact and no-contact-then-pedagogical conditions), with whom they presumably shared a stronger bond (i.e., social affiliation) and whose normative behavior they may have been

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10 Hoehl, et al., "The Role of Social Interactions," 131.

11 Froese and Leavens, "The Direct Perception Hypothesis," 5.

12 Tomasello has revised his previous thesis according to which only humans can understand conspecifics as intentional agents. Recent research has shown that "nonhuman great apes not only are intentional agents themselves but also understand others as intentional agents": Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 20; see also ix–x.

> more motivated to copy. In the pedagogical-then-pedagogical condition, both experimenters were equally familiar and pedagogical. Here, it seems that children's behavior was flexible and they performed the strategy they had seen last.[13]

The capability of toddlers to imitate the actions of others precisely shapes even their neuronal system. The difference between human children and apes is even reflected in their mirror system. While mirror neurons in apes seem to react only to goal-directed action, "the human mirror system . . . codes both transitive and intransitive motor acts, it is able to code both the goal of the motor act and the movement of which the act is composed."[14]

The significance of so-called overimitation in a typically human mode of life is revealed only once the difference between the contexts of one's lifeworld and the experimental setup in developmental psychology is taken into account. The experiments just mentioned prompt children to imitate a pointless action—and the reason they are set up this way is that researchers are aware of the significance of overimitation for children. Thus, in the lab, overimitation seems pointless, requiring a time commitment and incurring a competitive disadvantage. But what seems odd in the lab does indeed serve a purpose in one's lifeworld. In this latter context, children imitate the actions of their adult caregivers as well, yet these actions are typically goal directed. Evolution and history have optimized a multitude of types of action. Even noninstrumental actions such as greeting rituals, for example, often fulfill a precise purpose in the lifeworld.

In learning by imitation, human children explore not only the world that has already opened up for them through cognition but also an entire world of pragmatic options, even if the meaning of the options is not plain to them. We can observe this every day. For example, toddlers learn to close the fridge long before their parents have explained, linguistically, the result of an open fridge—melting ice, spoiling groceries, and a higher electricity bill. The fridge must be closed, and if an adult leaves it open too long, a child may well close it spontaneously. In mimetic learning, children grasp the difference between the necessity of closing the fridge and the possibility of leaving other doors, or windows, open. The same holds for noninstrumental actions. When attending a church service, children imitate their parents in taking a moment to stand for meditation or a silent prayer before taking a seat in the pew. This way they learn to enact, in an embodied way, the difference that distinguishes liturgical communication from communication in the everyday world—long before they are able to grasp this difference intellectually—and this will then enable them to adopt an autonomous stance toward these different modes of communication.

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13 Hoehl, et al., "The Role of Social Interactions," 131.

14 Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain: How our Minds Share Actions and Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 124.

The specific way humans learn culturally, their ability to learn not only from but also through others, is manifest on an elementary level in the child's imitation of another. Thus, there is no point at which this kind of learning has taken place in a nonembodied form. Humans begin to learn culturally when one person imitates another, or even overimitates that person, to borrow the terminology of developmental psychology. Embodied imitation is the tipping point at which natural evolution shifts to cultural development. Evolution has brought forth a life form that tends to imitate others by nature—and which is thus shaped culturally from the outset.

Evolutionary Anthropology Advocating for a Plurality of Culture

Human beings are cultural beings by nature. To a large extent they shape their own behavior by learning and imitating other humans physically, rather than following natural instincts. The development of the human person is clearly shaped by cultural environment, and at different times and in different contexts, the person will develop differently. Based on this mutual interdependence of natural and cultural processes, we can conclude that humans do not live in a particular culture by nature. This has also been pointed out by the Jewish philosopher Michael Landmann (1913–84), who wrote that "what is prefigured already in nature is the mere fact of culture, but not its particular shape."[15] There is no type of culture that *necessarily* derives from human nature. He writes: "For that reason it is not correct either to conceive of culture in the singular as a human creation. Humans do not create culture in the singular, but particular people create their own culture. Humanity creates cultures."[16] Yet, since humans not only create diverse cultures but are themselves shaped by their respective cultures, there is no definite human essence. As both creators and creatures of culture, we always encounter human nature in the plural.

> The human person is just as diverse . . . as the cultures that shape the person. It is not that the human person brings forth different cultures while remaining the same, passing through them untouched as a constant entity. In creating cultures, humans finish creating themselves, and in each culture they provide themselves with a different form and direction.[17]

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15 Michael Landmann, *Der Mensch als Schöpfer und Geschöpf der Kultur: Geschichts- und Sozialanthropologie* (Munich/Basel: Reinhardt, 1961), 60.

16 Ibid., 26.

17 Ibid., 61.

Due to the shape of each culture created by humans, human nature itself changes throughout history. "Historical variability is the radical human fate."[18] The notion of an unchanging human core thus turns out to be a fiction. "If we wish to speak of a core, this would be nothing but open plasticity."[19]

This philosophical realization is correlated with the biological fact of the enormous human plasticity in the process of ontogenesis. The elementary formation of the human baby during the first year is characterized by exchange with others, which amounts to cultural formation.

> Thus already during the first year, the life of the human child takes place in the realm of the "historic," in a time during which the human neonate—if it were a mammal in every respect—would still have to gain shape under the most pure conditions of natural law, i. e., in the darkness of the womb.[20]

But even processes that are seemingly purely somatic, "such as gaining an upright gait, the formation of the spine and the pelvis,"[21] take place in relationship to the social environment, in one's "own activity of striving, learning, and imitation."[22] This is even clearer for the "development of truly human opportunities,"[23] as in the varied uses of the hand, which can learn to write in an "elegant hand," to play the piano brilliantly, to touch gently. The "slow speed" of human somatic development allows for social and psychic shaping, thus bringing forth the human being as an entity characterized by an irreducible mutual interdependence of nature and culture, body and psyche.[24]

What the biologist Adolf Portmann described with respect to development and behavior corresponds to current thinking about the plasticity of the human brain. "The human brain is not only the most complex, but also the most adaptable organ that we know of. As the neurosciences show, all our experiences, perceptions, and interactions with the environment modify the neuronal structures throughout our lives."[25] Notably, the long maturation period of the human brain is hugely significant, since at birth it amounts "only to a little more than 25 percent of an adult's brain volume," appearing not to be fully mature even at the age

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18 Ibid., 26.

19 Ibid., 62, see 27.

20 Adolf Portmann, *Biologische Fragmente: Zu einer Lehre vom Menschen* (Basel: Schwabe, 1944), 70, see 81.

21 Ibid., 125.

22 Ibid., 70.

23 Ibid., 101.

24 Ibid.

25 Thomas Fuchs, *Das Gehirn—ein Beziehungsorgan: Eine phänomenologische-ökologische Konzeption*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2013), 156.

of ten.[26] Evolution has thus brought forth an organ that for its development depends on an environment conducive to life, only attaining its complex and detailed structure through interaction with the environment. The influence of the environment extends even into precise neuronal structures. Thus, brain research confirms an insight that Portmann, as a biologist, had attained in the 1940 s: "We see the biological characteristics of the human precisely in how inherited factors irreducibly grow together with the various social effects—in ways that are final and unique from the point of view of the individual."[27] The extent to which the human person is open to social influences can also be seen in human sexuality: "even that part of human behavior that is most instinctual, sexuality, is open for a far-reaching freedom of personal decision"[28]—and thus for cultural shaping.

Human Plasticity and the Creature's Freedom to Make Itself

The fact that human beings are by nature pure plasticity, that they can form and change their nature, demonstrates the great freedom which, theologically speaking, the Creator awards the creature.

If we understand human beings as pure plasticity, it is also clear that by nature they receive no determination about how to behave. Humans must discover their own vocation (*Bestimmung*). This fact corresponds precisely to the biblical description of humankind. In view of the Old Testament, Hans-Walter Wolff asserted: "In his dialogue with God above all, the human sees himself as called into question, searched out and thus much less established for what he is than called to new things."[29] In accordance with this, the New Testament also sees humanity as characterized by an open future. The First Epistle of John puts it paradigmatically: "what we will be has not yet been revealed" (1 John 3:2). This biblical insight goes well together with an evolutionary anthropology which does not aim to describe the essence of humanity, but rather to understand better those natural processes that allow humans to create and establish something new again and again.

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26 Gisela Gruppe, et al., *Anthropologie. Einführendes Lesebuch*, 2nd ed. (Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), 67 f.

27 Portmann, *Biologische Fragmente*, 127.

28 Ibid., 59.

29 Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl, reprint (London: SCM/Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1975), 3. Translation revised.

Religious Formation

Religious education gives people a sense of orientation. Theologically, one could say that the Creator not only gives humans freedom to explore their own possibilities but also accompanies them in this process, by showing them their calling (*Bestimmung*). Biblically speaking, this is expressed by the fact that creation ultimately aims at the law. The Creator of the world is conceived in the Bible as the God of Israel, who gives God's people the law and the commandments. Here we come across the proximity of religion and law, which characterizes all monotheistic religions.

All legal corpora of the Old Testament have a comparable structure: they comprise regulations which deal with the legal regulation of conflicts and aim at justice; they contain regulations "that aim at the routine protection of the weak and the systematic safeguarding of their interests" (mercy), and they contain sections regulating the cultic life of Israel.[30] The law aims therefore at justice, mercy, and the knowledge of God. Humanity should use its freedom in order to embody justice, mercy, and the knowledge of God in this world; in this sense, humanity is called to be the image of God.

The significance of religious education and formation can also be demonstrated in a secular age. Religious education encourages an orientation toward justice and mercy. In this respect, civil society benefits from active and dynamic religious communities. Studies in the social sciences have demonstrated that such communities are very important for a lively and dynamic civil society. First of all, religious communities generate a large amount of volunteer work. In Germany, we may safely assume that more than four million persons involved with the two major churches are active as volunteers. Moreover, religious education foster attitudes from which civil society profits. Social scientist Sigrid Roßteutscher, from Frankfurt University, states, "Thus, religious institutions turn out indeed to be a training ground of pro-social orientation, which see their task in advocacy on behalf of the weak and which support a culture of 'benevolence.'"[31] Even the area of divine worship, so awkward for a secular society, is of social importance. Secularly speaking, the cultic aspect of religion expressed in worship aims to create and shape common memories and common expectations. Such memories and ex-

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30 Michael Welker, "Justice – Mercy – Worship. The 'Weighty Matters' of Biblical Law," in *Concepts of Law in the Sciences, Legal Studies, and Theology*, ed. Michael Welker and Gregor Etzelmüller, Religion in Philosophy and Theology 72 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 205–24, at 206.

31 Sigrid Roßteutscher, *Religion, Zivilgesellschaft, Demokratie. Eine international vergleichende Studie zur Natur religiöser Märkte und der demokratischen Rolle religiöser Zivilgesellschaften*, Studien zur Wahl- und Einstellungsforschung 12 (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2009), 423.

pectations shape our societies and our daily lives. What we remember and what we expect make a difference in how we live our lives.

Let me explain this with reference to the Old Testament, specifically the Old Testament's mercy code. It lays out the routines of mercy which are required by the law and are based on the memory of the Exodus. The book of the covenant already seeks to justify the commandments to protect foreigners with a reminder that Israel was once a foreigner itself in Egypt (Ex. 22:20; 23:9). Even more comprehensive is the approach taken by Deuteronomy, which derives not just the rights of foreigners but those of widows, orphans, and slaves from a reminder of Israel's bondage in Egypt and the experience of being brought out of Egypt by YHWH (Deut. 15:15; 24:18, 22). The priestly literature also subscribes to this tradition. The commandments to protect foreigners (Lev. 19:34) and the impoverished Israelites (Lev. 25:35–43) are based on the reminder that Israel was enslaved and then delivered out of Egypt. This means that by keeping the memory of the liberation from Egypt alive through the worship of YHWH alone, the Old Testament cult reinforces the routines of mercy required by the law. The cultic memory of the liberation of Egypt shapes social legislation in Israel.

Like the elementary processes of human learning, religious education and formation are not purely cognitive but always embodied. In Deuteronomy, people learn the law not only by listening to it during the worship but also by celebrating a common meal:

> And you shall eat before the Lord your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. (Deut. 14:23)

What is more, not just free landholders but slaves, foreigners, widows, and orphans are expected to share in this meal (cf. Deut. 16:11, 14). The existence of slaves is still assumed, although the presuppositions of a slaveholding society are already being transcended in the feast, at least for a time. The miserable social situation of the typical welfare case in the ancient world—foreigners, orphans, and widows—is no longer ignored in the context of the cult; what is more, it is temporarily overcome in the shared sacrificial meal. The feast suspends class differences and unites Israel into one large family. According to the book of Deuteronomy, in the Old Testament cult a new society is not only proclaimed but realized and embodied. This did not change society immediately. Slaveholding was accepted by the Deuteronomic law. But in worship one thing becomes clear: slaveholding is not what God has intended for God's people. What is more, this insight began to change ideas about how to deal with slaves. Some Old Testament scholars have

argued that Deuteronomy transformed slaveholding into an early form of wage labor (*Lohnarbeit*) instead.[32]

As with the Old Testament cult, the Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper suspends differences between Christians and unites all into one body and one people: "They need one and the same sacrament and become one and the same people and at the same time a sacred sworn community; they become one body and one people."[33]

It had already been the historical experience of Old Testament Israel that the people had not lived up to the law. All in all, whoever recognizes that humanity is called to impart righteousness, mercy, and the knowledge of God in the world must also acknowledge that humanity fails to pursue its true calling, that humans are, theologically speaking, sinners. Religious education not only recalls and teaches humankind's ultimate vocation but also makes us aware of how humanity fails to live up to it.

In the Reformed tradition, worship always begins with the confession of sin. Remembering and confessing that we are all sinners, we acknowledge that we can also go astray, even when we are united and intend to pursue a good path of action. This insight is of great political importance in our current situation. It calls not only for more democracy but for a sophisticated system of checks and balances, for a robust republic. Even John Calvin has inferred from the "vices or defects of men" that "it is safer and more tolerable when several bear rule, that they may thus mutually assist, instruct, and admonish each other, and should anyone be disposed to go too far, the others are censors and masters to curb his excess."[34] The knowledge of the power of sin not only about the people but also about the holders of state power requires the control of their power.

For Christians, it is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ which reveals human sin. The cross of Jesus Christ reveals that even the good gifts of law, religion, education, and public opinion can also work against God's good and positive intentions for creation: Christ is executed in the name of both Roman and Jewish law.[35] So it is clear that even the law itself can come under the power of sin.

By simultaneously providing an underpinning for the law while raising awareness about the law's potential endangerment, a biblically shaped religious

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32 Cf. Frank Crüsemann, *Die Tora. Theologie und Sozialgeschichte des alttestamentlichen Gesetzes* (Munich: Kaiser, 1992), 272.

33 Cf. Huldreich Zwingli, *Sämtliche Werke* VI, 5, 161, 2–5: "Qui enim unis eisdemque sacramentis utuntur, una eademque gens ac sancta quedam coniuratio fiunt in unum corpus, inque populum unum coeunty."

34 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), IV, 20, 8.

35 Cf. Michael Welker, *God the Revealed: Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), ch. 3.

formation fosters a powerful connection between different traditions and serves to strengthen and unsettle the law in equal measure. Just as law and prophecy mutually challenge one another in the Old Testament, religious education can foster powerful relationships in modern societies between social systems (such as the economic, legal, and political systems) and the voluntary associations of civil society, which continually critique these systemic forms in order to transform them.

In this sense, we can argue that religious formation seeks to cultivate an attitude of awareness of the high calling of humanity while also confessing that humanity misses the mark, fails to live up to its calling. In view of the knowledge of our vocation, and of our transgressions, religious education, in its Protestant form, teaches the justification of the sinner by faith. God is not only the creator who has given freedom to creation to develop itself, and the lawgiver, who continually accompanies created beings with God's commandment. God is also a God who acknowledges human weakness yet does not abandon the creation, repeatedly offering help instead. Religious education, therefore, generates hope because it perceives not only humanity in its sin, but also the God who empowers humans to bring justice, mercy, and knowledge of God into the world. Because faith knows that it does not deserve this saving action of God, and that the believer does not have an advantage over the unbeliever, faith also hopes for saving actions of God even outside the churches and the monotheistic religions. In this sense, religious education generates hope for all people and for all times and for all regions of the world.

Humans are by nature called to education and formation, but they are not predestined for a specific culture. Religious education wants to give humans a clear sense of orientation: it teaches us about our human calling, raises awareness of how we fail to live out this vocation, and reveals God as one who helps humanity in this situation, thus giving humanity, giving us, hope.