

Gerhard Büttner\*  
TU Dortmund University, Germany

## Family communication and images of God in children's literature

Thirty years ago a synod dealing with the subject “Passing on Faith to the Next Generation” took place in the diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the idea was that – in light of social changes – certain self-evident facts were not valid any more. The friendly confessional environment had been dissolved, so that the passing on of the religious identity to the next generation became the topic of discussion. In addition, the synod ambitiously stated:<sup>2</sup> “The Second Vatican Council speaks of the parents’ duty ‘to be the first religious messengers of their children by word and example’ and calls the family ‘a kind of domestic Church.’”

The reference to the family appears only after offers made by the Church people, institutions and the school.<sup>3</sup> It is worth examining what the process of passing on religion looks like in empirical studies. Jürgen Zinnecker and Ralph Hasenberg also ask “whether and how the passing on of culture from

---

\* Gerhard Büttner, born 1948, studied Lutheran theology, political science and history; a teacher, in 1999–2010 a professor of religious education, now retired.

<sup>1</sup> Bischöfliches Ordinariat Rottenburg, Beschlüsse der Diözesansynode Rottenburg-Stuttgart, *Weitergabe des Glaubens an die kommende Generation*, Ostfildern 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Bischöfliches Ordinariat, *Weitergabe des Glaubens...*, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Bischöfliches Ordinariat, *Weitergabe des Glaubens...*, p. 115ff. Similar questions with a supporting testimony can be found in: J. Stala, E. Osewska, *Anders erziehen in Polen. Der Erziehungs- und Bildungsbegriff im Kontext eines sich ständig verändernden Europas des XXI. Jahrhunderts*, Tarnów 2009.

one generation to the next is possible when cultural systems themselves are subject to processes of radical and rapid dismantling and rebuilding.” Within this, an ambiguous task appears “in a time which is laid out worldwide on cultural discontinuity to generate cultural continuity in everyday educational life with adolescents.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in some ways, families create their own “small culture to counter the mainstream social culture.”<sup>5</sup> According to the authors, this is supported by the fact that the choice of the partner does not necessarily take place within the same denomination.<sup>6</sup> This means that partners often choose each other because of religious compatibility.<sup>7</sup> In view of the meaning of educational institutions, Zinnecker and Hausfeld make now an interesting summary: “Looking at the historically looming change of religious socialisation instances, we can speak of ‘the feminization of religious tradition.’ Within three family generations, from grandparents to grandchildren, male authorities who *ex offico* were traditionally responsible for the passing on of ecclesiality and religion, local priest and teacher, had to withdraw. Instead, to a degree, women became the guardians of religious instruction in the family.”<sup>8</sup>

One can also read this statement in such a way that the majority of religious teachers are female, and for Protestants, this is also increasingly valid for priests. However, what it primarily means is that religious education is moving into the family sphere. Additionally, and this shall be subsequently explained, the communication style as well as the shape of the content are changing. The latter is specifically co-constructed to the family as a rule and therefore receives, in contrast to an imaginary Church orthodoxy, its respective nuances and small “syncretism.” Karl Ernst Nipkow has correctly questioned whether the statement “passing on the faith” is appropriate for

---

<sup>4</sup> J. Zinnecker, R. Hasenberg, *Religiöse Eltern und religiöse Kinder: Die Übertragung von Religion auf die nachfolgende Generation in der Familie*, in: *Entwicklung im sozialen Wandel*, eds. R. K. Silbereisen, J. Zinnecker, Weinheim 1999, pp. 445–457.

<sup>5</sup> J. Zinnecker, R. Hasenberg, *Religiöse Eltern...*, p. 446.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. Zinnecker, R. Hasenberg, *Religiöse Eltern...*, p. 454.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. However, an investigation into families in East Germany in which one partner is explicitly non-religious and the other is a Church member shows that, in view of the religious education of children, this can become confrontational or lead to avoiding the issue – see: H. Liebold, “In der Hinsicht lassen wir uns eigentlich ziemlich in Ruhe.” *Religiöse Erziehung in christlich-konfessionslosen Familien. Ein Beitrag aus Ostdeutschland*, “Wege zum Menschen” 57 (2005) 3, pp. 239–253.

<sup>8</sup> J. Zinnecker, R. Hasenberg, *Religiöse Eltern...*, p. 456.

the case and whether the recent term “communication of the faith” is not more suitable.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, we will have to ask how we are to imagine the way in which the family communicates religion or religiousness and what makes styles of religious communication distinct. I will try to show this with the help of social science studies. At the same time, I will use another source in my presentation. One can substantiate that children's books play a role in family communication, particularly for younger children. Naturally, these books always have a double meaning and are chosen with a clear intention by parents who select them. This is especially true for biblical stories. Yet, these books also try to address the circumstances for which they are written. With this in mind, two particular areas are addressed: Of course we can expect that modes of communication that children's books present “fit” the reading family even if they are not identical. However, one also cannot completely disregard a thesis that formulates a supposition of an interplay between the family structure and God's image. This means that the perspective of the family's religious education is meaningfully expanded to include questions in which the images or the understanding of God are also considered.

## 1. Family communication and the evening ritual

Does it matter in which context communication takes place? The sociologist Niklas Luhmann assumes that in modern societies there are distinctions within different functional systems – all of which have their own modes of communication. Specifically, this means that in each respective functional system, different roles are communicated. In the economic system, there are buyers and sellers, in the education system – teachers and students. Communication therefore means that there are certain rules or behavioural expectations, for example with regard to the content of conversations. If one does not keep up to these expectations, it might look **embarrassing**. According to Luhmann, however, there is a social system in which these rules

<sup>9</sup> K. E. Nipkow, *Grundoptionen gelingender Glaubenskommunikation in lerntheoretischer und anthropologisch-theologischer Spiegelung*, in: *Elemente einer gelingenden Glaubenskommunikation. Für Albert Biesinger*, eds. R. Boschki et alii, Freiburg im Breisgau 2008, pp. 44–56; cf. C. Grethlein, “*Religion*” oder “*Kommunikation des Evangeliums*” als Leitbegriff für die Praktische Theologie?, “*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*” 112 (2015), pp. 468–489.

are not valid – the family. Luhmann sees a “disinhibited communication” there.<sup>10</sup> For Luhmann, the astonishing word **disinhibited** means that “the whole person“ can become an issue.<sup>11</sup> In practical terms this means that also embarrassing subjects can be approached, yet with tact and respect. This gives a privileged position to the family. In a time when religious questions are more and more ascribed to the sphere of intimacy, the family becomes more and more important at this point.<sup>12</sup> Where can fears, guilt and hope be picked out as a central theme if not in the protective space of the family? Within the family we can also recognize that conversations about faith (or the lack thereof) have a special place as well.

Beyond this abstract understanding, we can ask where religious communication really takes place in the family. Assuming that the meals which are shared are often shifted to the weekend, and saying grace at mealtime becomes less important, the moments of intimate, family communication become concentrated on bedtime rituals. This has become more meaningful in case of smaller families with fewer children who usually have their own rooms. Thus, the transition of family community time to the individualised routines of falling asleep becomes particularly important. As a rule, a parent, and sometimes both parents, devote themselves to this evening event to a higher extent, spending more time and offering more attention. Therefore, it is worthwhile to closely observe this custom.<sup>13</sup> Christoh Morgenthaler has interviewed many parents about evening rituals with their children in German-speaking Switzerland. He has also created video documentaries that give insight into these intimate family events.<sup>14</sup> He formulated his programme as follows: “It asks how evening rituals become the way by which religion or

---

<sup>10</sup> N. Luhmann, *Sozialsystem Familie*, in: N. Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung* 5, Opladen 1995, pp. 196–217. This is also addressed in other terminology in: J. Stala, *Religious education/catechesis in the family: a basic psychological and Church perspective*, in: *Religious education/catechesis in the family. A European perspective*, eds. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Warszawa 2010, pp. 49–57.

<sup>11</sup> N. Luhmann, *Sozialsystem Familie...*, p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> G. Büttner, “Enthemmte Kommunikation” als Voraussetzung für Glauben-Lernen, in: *Kirchenreform. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, Hrsg. I. Karle, Leipzig 2009, pp. 237–252.

<sup>13</sup> From a pedagogical point of view see: M. Xyländer, *Die Familie als Bildungsgemeinschaft. Abendrituale in rekonstruktiver Perspektive*, Opladen, Berlin & Toronto 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Ch. Morgenthaler, *Abendrituale. Tradition und Innovation in jungen Familien*, Stuttgart 2011.

religious beliefs, whether Christian or not, or any other religious practices, are shared, taught and learned.”<sup>15</sup>

In the following paragraphs, I am primarily interested in the role that parents play when putting their children to bed, as well as the particulars of the structure of the evening prayer. With regard to the evening ritual, parents’ intention is likely to be twofold – besides meditation of a religious content, there is definitely a desire that children will quickly fall asleep. Thus, a mother says: “Because the idea of prayer and singing and the previous story is, actually, the idea of ‘swinging down from above’. And [...] that also one prays in bed, and that one does stay in bed. Because, above all, also [...] that they do not wake up again.”<sup>16</sup> A mother recalls:<sup>17</sup> “As young adults you can’t remember the lines of all the lullabies anymore. Then suddenly, as soon as you become a mother, you recall them as if they just came along with the hormones. Suddenly, you remember an old text again; and as if the lullaby I have just sung to her in the womb, I got from the school song book.” Additionally, the Swiss-German chanted song of the Glöggli plays an important role in many families.<sup>18</sup> According to Morgenthaler, the “intra-family tradition of the evening prayer [...] seems to have remained consistent (compared to a decrease of religious practice in other fields). It has almost revived since the 1980s.”<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Evening prayer as a co-construction

Let us begin to look at the intimate communication on a cot with a literary representation of Gabriele Wohmann. She illustrates how a young couple tries to come to an agreement about the evening ritual for little Dirk. Up until now, the evening ritual was presumably about some figure from a children’s book. However, one day Carla, the mother, articulates her wish that their

<sup>15</sup> Ch. Morgenthaler, *Abendrituale...*, p. 28. According to Morgenthaler (p. 121) “a broad concept of religiosity is assumed.”

<sup>16</sup> Ch. Morgenthaler, *Abendrituale...*, p. 82.

<sup>17</sup> Ch. Morgenthaler, *Abendrituale...*, p. 161.

<sup>18</sup> Ch. Morgenthaler, *Abendrituale...*, p. 146: “I hear the small bell ringing, it rings so nicely. The day has passed, now I go to bed, in bed I pray and then fall asleep, God in heaven will probably be with me.”

<sup>19</sup> Ch. Morgenthaler, *Abendrituale...*, p. 173.

child should begin to recite a prayer in the evening. Despite the seriousness of the story, the mother's attempts to introduce the idea of prayer into the evening ritual ends with humorous results.<sup>20</sup>

The next evening, Carla sat on the edge of Dirk's bed, finishing the part of the ritual with "Close both little eyes," as Dirk folded his small hands, then pulled them apart and formed them as if he was clasping a gun. "Bang bang!" He shouted. His innocent and gentle face was cheerful. Dirk tried to look fierce and trigger-happy. "Not now," said Carla warily. "What we are doing now, is [...] well, now we are praying."

This episode points to two observations which will be confirmed in the empiric material. First, that the essence of the evening ritual should be balanced and firm. This means that security and trust of the evening event is only guaranteed if familiar and comforting elements are present. The Wohmann text shows that it is not at all easy to arbitrarily change the evening ritual, e.g. towards a greater focus on religion. However, it also becomes evident that – as Nipkow complained – the idea of "passing on faith" does not work if parents simply transmit the content or an act to the child. Just as little Dirk articulates his opposition, these children – albeit with a different model – do it over and over again. This means that the children are active co-creators of what happens at the bedside. I will show this by offering two examples from Morgenthaler's study.<sup>21</sup> "Every evening, prayers are said in a similar manner. About halfway through the ritual, these prayers are initiated by the father and mother, or from the children. Both boys do not want to miss it anymore (Bruno once told his mother, after she had forgotten to pray, that he still prayed for himself and had ordered the moon to transmit good wishes to the nun in Italy). First, the family negotiates who should guide the prayer. The person who is chosen – most of the time it is the father or the mother – begins the prayer with some words of thanks. Then, a part of the intercessory prayer is initiated with the words 'God protect...'"

Katharina Kammeyer offers an example which shows that this negotiation can also result in a disagreement: "In the family of six-year-old Mirjam, a planning discussion takes place in which the mother asks what they want

---

<sup>20</sup> G. Wohmann, *Müde bin ich – und wie weiter?*, in: G. Wohmann, *Erzählen sie mir was vom Jenseits. Gedichte, Erzählungen und Gedanken*, Mainz 1994, pp. 86–96.

<sup>21</sup> Ch. Morgenthaler, *Abendrituale...*, p. 43; cf. pp. 90, 203.

to recite together before the actual prayer, which takes a lot of space and also determines the course of the praying itself [...]. When there are any deviations from the planned content, Mirjam interrupts the style of the prayer and both change back to the discourse level.”<sup>22</sup>

More specifically, it is about the intercession for the day-care centre which is important to the mother, but not for Mirjam who does not like to support it.<sup>23</sup> These findings lead us to the question as to how these parent-child conversations are reflected in religious literature for children. Furthermore there is an English picture book written by the psychologist Elizabeth Liddle about a conversation between Pip and his mother in connection with the going-to-bed ritual.<sup>24</sup> We quote and analyse the first conversation:

“Pip liked to ask questions. Especially at bedtime.  
 Sometimes he listened to the answers.  
 He mostly liked to answer the questions by himself.  
 When Pip was a little boy, he asked his mother, ‘Where is God?’ ‘What do you think, Pip?’  
 ‘In heaven,’ said Pip. ‘But Mother, where is heaven?’  
 Before she could answer, ‘I think,’ said Pip, ‘it’s up.’  
 ‘Why do you think it’s up?’ said his mother.  
 ‘Because down is just earth.’ said Pip.  
 ‘But up is sky, and I think God is in the sky.  
 From the sky God can look down on us and look after us.’  
 ‘Good Night Pip,’ said his mother, ‘God bless you.’”<sup>25</sup>

The scene is extremely revealing. It reflects an intimate conversation which we also found in the empiric studies. Two trends appear behind the mother’s open strategy. On the one hand, her manner of passing the questions to Pip, refers to the Socratic style where the thinking of one’s opponent is

<sup>22</sup> K. Kammeyer, “Lieber Gott, Amen!” *Theologische und empirische Studien zum Gebet im Horizont theologischer Gespräche mit Vorschulkindern*, Stuttgart 2009, p. 314. Hereby she refers to the work by Morgenthaler from: R. Bichsel-Triches, *Abend-Talk mit dem Engelchef*, Bern 2003.

<sup>23</sup> K. Kammeyer, “Lieber Gott, Amen!”..., p. 314ff.

<sup>24</sup> E. Liddle, *Pip and the Edge of Heaven*, illustrated by Lara Jones, Oxford 2002; German edition: *Mama, wie groß ist der Himmel?*, illustrated by Imke Sonnichsen, Stuttgart–Wien 2003.

<sup>25</sup> E. Liddle, *Pip and the Edge of Heaven...*

challenged through questioning. On the other hand, the mother knows, to use von Foerster's term, that the questions are "undecidable questions." The main attraction of the book lies, among other things, in the fact that as Pip's answers progress, it becomes clear that they become insufficient and have to be developed further. This means that the conversation takes place in an open space – the answers are marked as temporary but somehow binding. One recognizes this by the fact that the answer about God in the sky (physically) is left open. However, with the blessing, the mother gives a **performative answer** whose relevance and truth Pip can instantly feel at that moment.

### 3. Parental image and the image of God

We are now focusing on the communication between one or both parents and the child, and if necessary, between siblings. At this point, however, Morgenthaler's study makes clear that the parents' relationship immediately affects the evening ritual. Thus, it becomes clear that the separation of the parents effects the child, which is also reflected in disturbances during the going-to-bed ritual. One can take this observation by beginning with the question of whether the experience of the child with his parent is reflected in the same way as he or she imagines God.<sup>26</sup> In religious psychology, this subject belonged to the most preferred subjects for a long time – marked by the hypotheses which see the image of God as intricately connected to the father or mother figure. Additionally, a great interculturally invested study shows that elements of both parental images are adopted into the image of God:<sup>27</sup> "The representation of God, to a great degree, incorporates both parental figures and is therefore more complex than the father figure. In a certain way the representation of God is more maternal than paternal because it stresses more the maternal qualities than the paternal."

Friedrich Schweitzer makes clear that though these imaginations are necessary, their specific characteristics are not only dependent on the real

---

<sup>26</sup> Ch. Morgenthaler, *Abendrituale...*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> A. Vergote, *Overview an theoretical perspective*, in: *The parental figures and the representation of God. A psychological and cross-cultural study*, eds. A. Vergote, A. Tamayo, The Hague–Paris–New York 1981, pp. 185–225.

parents, but are also formed by ruling ideals and the influence of specific religious traditions.<sup>28</sup> We know from a study by Simone de Roos that with non-religious parents, the educators' image of God in kindergarten has an influence on children.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, it would be interesting to have a look at the effects of patchwork families on religious education. In addition, religion seems to occur only to the extent in which the everyday communication of the spouse plays a role. As a possible source of information I also adduce children's books at this point.

#### 4. Fragmentary reality in children's books

In her overview about recent children's books in Western Europe, Rita Ghesquière comes to the understanding that these represent not only the sheltered environment of children, but reflect that anything can happen to today's children.<sup>30</sup> In this respect, a look at such children's books make us more sensitive to the (family) context in which the question of God is raised for youngsters. These days the number of children's books that broach the issue of religious questions as a central theme are kept within limits. Nevertheless, my choice is rather accidental. It results from research for a seminar on the subject, and is also based on tips from friendly colleagues.<sup>31</sup> For me – this would be anticipated – it was nevertheless astonishing, how similar the books of quite different authors thematically are. I will report the content of four books and then discuss which patterns appear in connection with the family and the image of God.

<sup>28</sup> F. Schweitzer, *Elternbilder – Gottesbilder, Wandlung der Elternrollen und die Entwicklung des Gottesbildes im Kindesalter*, "Katechetische Blätter" 119 (1994), pp. 91–95.

<sup>29</sup> S. A. De Roos, *Der Einfluss von Eltern und Erzieherinnen auf die Gottesbilder von Kindern*, in: *Brauchen Kinder Religion? Neue Erkenntnisse – Praktische Perspektiven*, eds. A. Biesinger, H.-J. Kerner, G Klosinski, F. Schweitzer, Weinheim–Basel 2005, pp. 80–94.

<sup>30</sup> R. Ghesquière, *Through a glass darkly: the search for meaning and the challenges of contemporary children's literature*, in: *Children's voices. children's perspectives in ethics, theology and religious education*, eds. A. Dillen, D. Pollefeyt, Leuven, Paris– Walpole 2010, p. 397–420.

<sup>31</sup> The two books I have selected for discussion can be found in: M. Zimmermann, *Literatur für den Religionsunterricht. Kinder- und Jugendbücher für den Religionsunterricht*, Göttingen 2012 (Pausewang p. 40ff and Thiel p. 88ff).

The German children's book author Gudrun Pausewang,<sup>32</sup> with her international best-sellers about the threat of war and radioactive contamination, has written a children's book about the theodicy issue "I give you one more chance, God!"

Eight-year-old Nina sees before her very eyes a mother cat run over, and how the new-born kitten sits beside the dying mother. Nina befriends the little animal, however, her single mother explains to Nina that she cannot bring the cat home. As a result, the little girl wanders around the city with the small cat. She meets different kinds of people and also runs into danger, among other things, a man who apparently tries to abuse the girl. However, at the end of the night she meets a young man, a graffiti artist, with whom she can discuss her problem and who informs her that her mother – including the cat – are eagerly waiting for her.

Involved in this story is Nina's question about God and how He can let bad things happen. Nina's image of God with an anthropomorphous shape from a children's Bible is, after the episode with the dying mother cat, dismissed by Him – like Easter bunny and Santa Claus.

In Nina's time with the artist, she is fascinated by a spraying pattern that she mistakes for a "pork God." This confidence develops together with her care for the kitten. However, throughout the course of the day and the night, this image also becomes fragile, particularly as she also hears about other gods (in the plural). However, in the conversation with the graffiti artist, a new image of God opens up to her, even if this does not answer many questions, possibly the issue of justice. Then, the graffiti artist tries to paint a suitable picture on the wall. However, at the same time another scene occurs, where the graffiti artist catches Nina as she falls off the cemetery wall they had climbed and he returns her to her waiting mother.

Within this context, the third level can be marked in the story – the one of providence. This means that beyond the horrors and threats which Nina encounters this time, God's providence and care is always visible.

Taking our question into consideration, it is striking that at the family level, the role of the father is absent. It is taken – at least episodically – by the character of the young man with the spray cans. Even before the girl knows

---

<sup>32</sup> Cf. U. Jahnke, *Gudrun Pausewang. Leben und Werk*, Ravensburg 2010; S. Tebbutt, *Gudrun Pausewang in Context*, Frankfurt am Main 1994.

him personally, she is impressed with his pictures that inspire her imagination. It is no coincidence that he is the one who helps her find a new image of God. Even if she does not understand everything, the graffiti artist explains her everything in his new picture. The incidentally told leap of trust is a frequently used metaphor of trust in the fatherly God of the Bible. As we can see, this would be already said in the anticipation that the authors of children's books have every confidence in male figures in the context of a non-classic family make-up as far as religious questions are concerned.

The second book is from another known author of children's books – Irma Krauß.<sup>33</sup> *God moves*<sup>34</sup> is also principally concerned with the theodicy issue.

Here again, we encounter a fractured family whose trust in God has been affected by a bad incident. In contrast to the first story, the roles here are reversed. With regard to the subject of religion, the mother is hampered by the death of her husband. It is the children who can solve their mother's pain by their naïve (Märten) or reflected (Jörg) questioning. Again, it is Oliver, a male figure from outside, who restores contemplation and trust, to the family's functioning and is a catalyst in this story. Jörg's self-evident experience in view of God makes clear to him (and the readers) that the contemplation of this question where Oliver reaches out to God is important. However, faith becomes existentially tangible in another way.

In Polleke, the heroine of the children's book series by the Dutch author Guus Kuijter,<sup>35</sup> we encounter a truth-seeker like Jörg. The circumstances are clearly more complicated than in the previously reported books.

In my chosen book series, *Miracles One Cannot Order*,<sup>36</sup> there is a twelve year old girl, one of the two Dutch children learning in a multicultural class environment. She lives with her divorced mother who, as the plot unfolds, marries her teacher. A child friendship connects her with Mimun, a Moroccan classmate. Her father Spiek, his parents and especially the grandfather are of particular importance for religious questions. In a way, one could call

<sup>33</sup> B. Staudigl, I. Krauß, *Durch meine Augen in ein fremdes Herz*, in: *Vorneweg und mittendrin. Porträts erfolgreicher Frauen*, Hrsg. C. Boeser, B. Schaufler, Königstein im Taunus 2006, pp. 123–135.

<sup>34</sup> I. Krauß, *Gott zieht um*, Würzburg 2005.

<sup>35</sup> R. Guesquière, *Jeugdliteratuur in perspectief*, Leuven–Den Haag 2009, pp. 192–194.

<sup>36</sup> G. Kuijter, *Wunder kann man nicht bestellen*, Hamburg 2004. The Dutch version appeared under the title *Met de wind mee naar de zee*, Amsterdam 2001.

Polleke devout – even if she is not quite sure about her counterpart. Her father Spiek and his partner are followers of an Eastern religion because meditation has released him from his drug addiction. However, Polleke's grandfather, a devout Christian who lives out in the country is against it. For Polleke this topic becomes more important when it becomes clear that her grandfather has cancer and will die soon. In this situation, Polleke turns to the picture of the Virgin Mary in a church and expects a miracle from her, which ultimately fails to appear. However, during her visit with her grandfather, he leads them to the cemetery and points to where he will be buried. He then gives his granddaughter a chair for her to sit on when she visits his grave.

In contrast to the previous books, it is clear that an encounter with painful experiences does not automatically lead to the theodicy question. Polleke is a seeker, just like Jörg in the story of Irma Krauß. She experiences more than one religious tradition and with zealous practitioners: a Muslim (Mimun), a Buddhist (Spiek), and a Christian (grandfather). However, she is also bound to these people (as well as to her mother). Thus, Polleke's religious conflict never expresses itself in a hard, radical form like in the case of the characters of the other two books. One is bound to ascribe this also to the family make-up.

In this respect, the fourth book introduced here stands out from the others, as it is the literary debut of Christiane Thiel, a priest.<sup>37</sup> The story *The year in which I was 13½* takes place in the extremely secularized city of Leipzig.

After the death of her husband, the mother of Tine, the 13-year-old first-person narrator, together with her family, turns away from faith. After her husband's passing away, the mother lives with both of her daughters in Leipzig. This situation becomes disrupted by the fact that she has a new partner and they have a baby together. Tine likes her new father very much and is also happy about her new sibling. The fact that her new stepfather Carsten is religious and wants his new daughter to be baptized, makes young Tine confused. For Tine, this deviation from her familiar **standard conduct** is **embarrassing**. However, with Carsten's friendly impulses and above all those of his parents – Tines' "new grandparents," Tine approaches the Christian faith more and more in the course of the book. At the same time, she is experiencing some stress in her relation with a friend. To her surprise, a confessional conversation with a parson offers her a way out. Thus, both plot strands meet at the end.

---

<sup>37</sup> Cf. M. Zimmermann, *Literatur für den Religionsunterricht...*, p. 88ff.

This book also presents a parallel development of a growth in the family and the religious images of the protagonist. The new father and his parents become important initiators of Tine's religious development.

## 5. Attempts of a theological interpretation

My argument is based on observations in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Communication about religion between parents and children is also coined by the phenomenon of individualization.<sup>38</sup> This means that communication, as the example of the evening ritual shows, takes place in a room that every family has uniquely designed and, therefore, has an individual character. This also means that we are constantly dealing with new negotiation processes here. This applies to the coordination among adults in respect of whom one can assume, especially in matters of religion, that an automatic consensus cannot necessarily be expected. However, children are not regarded merely as recipients but as active co-constructors. It could even be expected that what children learn in kindergartens, through religious instruction or Church programs, for example nativity plays, brings their own perspectives or point of view to the family conversations. In this respect, the idea of theology as **communication of the Gospel** is presumably a more acceptable phrase than **passing on faith**.<sup>39</sup> Now, however, a view into children's books also draws attention to the fact that by no means is a family an undisputed phenomenon. Even if officially (and often ecclesiastically) married couples constitute an overall majority,<sup>40</sup> it only diminishes the outlined trend towards individualistic approaches.<sup>41</sup> In addition, this is what the children's books cited here show: Adults are searching religiously rather

<sup>38</sup> U. Beck, E. Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization – institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*, London 2002.

<sup>39</sup> G. Büttner, *Kinder- und Jugendtheologie als „Kommunikation des Evangeliums und des Glaubens“ – Im Lichte der Kritik von Bernhard Dressler*, Stuttgart 2015, pp. 9–18 (Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie, 14).

<sup>40</sup> Statistisches Bundesamt, Pressemitteilung No. 367 vom 20.10.2014: [https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2014/10/PD14\\_367\\_122.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2014/10/PD14_367_122.html) (08.06.2016).

<sup>41</sup> Perhaps best described in the book title concerning the religious situation in Switzerland: *Jede(r) ein Sonderfall? Religion in der Schweiz. Ergebnisse einer Repräsentativbefragung*, Hrsg. A. Dubach, R. J. Campiche, Zürich 1993.

than acting as experts who only need to pass their knowledge to children. This situation reflects itself in such a way that religious content (*fides qua creditor*) are coined by uncertainties and idiosyncratic arrangements.<sup>42</sup> This does not have to be a disadvantage but raises a question with regard to the relation between the family's religiosity and the religious teaching of Churches.

Thus, an ecclesiastic discourse has begun. Herman Lombaerts and Elżbieta Osewska regard the family to be a **house church** – the basis of a four-stage model: from the family to the parsonage, then to the diocese and finally to the universal Church. As a characteristic feature they formulate the following: "The family is the natural unit for sharing Christian living. Within the informal style, the natural love, the caring atmosphere and mutual recognition, children assimilate and integrate, through osmosis, the religious images, stories, emotions, vocabulary and language, rituals, relationships, and behavior related to sacred spaces, etc. They enter into the religious realm, which parents establish for themselves and live out with their children."<sup>43</sup>

This perception is theologically correct. However, one must address two questions concerning the family. The first is about the **self-description** of families themselves. Would families that were considered in this study see themselves as a form of the Church? If this is not the case, which can be assumed for the majority of families, is the corresponding external description legitimate then? How do we understand the characteristic features, noted in the above quotation about the family communication, as to whether they may at times reflect the reality? Can we also recognize the basic elements of the **Church** in the reality of fragmented families? I am inclined to see an ecclesiological dimension wherever a serious communication about God and faith takes place, and whenever such an interpretation is not explicitly contradicted by the participants.<sup>44</sup> Hence, I lean on a modest ecclesiology with regard to this question.

<sup>42</sup> In addition, with regard to religious education: G. Büttner, O. Reis, *Glaubenswissen – konstruktivistisch gelesen*, in: *Religion lernen*, Hrsg. G. Büttner et al., Babenhausen 2015, pp. 9–20 (Jahrbuch für konstruktivistische Religionsdidaktik, 6: Glaubenswissen).

<sup>43</sup> H. Lombaerts, E. Osewska, *Family catechesis/religious education in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe*, in: *Religious education/catechesis in the family. A European perspective*, pp. 27–47.

<sup>44</sup> G. Büttner, *Braucht Jugendtheologie eine "ekklesiologische" Fundierung?*, in: *Theologisieren mit Jugendlichen. Ein Programm für Schule und Kirche*, Hrsg. V.-J. Dieterich, Stuttgart 2012, pp. 70–78.

## Bibliography

- Büttner G., *Erziehung als Arbeit am "kulturellen Gedächtnis": Überlegungen zur Gebetspraxis im Kindergarten*, "Deutsches Pfarrerblatt" 102 (2002) Heft 9, pp. 438–443.
- Büttner G., *Mit Kindern und Jugendlichen über den Himmel sprechen*, "Evangelische Theologie" 65 (2005) Heft 5, pp. 366–381.
- Büttner G., "Enthemmte Kommunikation" als Voraussetzung für Glauben-Lernen, in: *Kirchenreform. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, Hrsg. I. Karle, Leipzig 2009, pp. 237–252.
- Büttner G., *Where do children get their theology from?*, in: *Children's voices. Children's perspectives in ethics, theology and religious education*, eds. A. Dillen, D. Pollefeyt, Leuven 2010, pp. 357–372.
- Büttner G., Dieterich V.-J., *Entwicklungspsychologie in der Religionspädagogik*, Göttingen 2016.