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## **The theological language of Montessori education and its effects on educational processes in childhood**

### **Summary**

The article relates to what historical educational research has been calling a theological heritage in pedagogy for some years now (e.g. Osterwalder 2005). The historical relationship between pedagogy and religion raises the question of how much theology there is in pedagogical concepts and what effects this theological content has on pedagogical practice. The study on which this article is based (Neff 2016) takes up these research findings and concerns and analyses them using the example of Montessori pedagogy. In addition to this legacy, findings of the analysis of Maria Montessori's numerous writings reveal a further argument that makes her pedagogy relevant to the present day. Furthermore, the diverse reception history of Montessori's statements on religion and religious education was analysed.

**Key words:** Montessori education, theological language, religious education

**Słowa kluczowe:** pedagogika Montessori, język teologiczny, kształcenie religijne

The research question of the study, the theoretical framework as well as the individual analytical steps and research results are presented for two of the analysed areas of Montessori pedagogy: the criticism of the theological language of pedagogy and the reception of Montessori's approach in religious education.

### **Pedagogy from religion?**

#### *Research question*

In his speeches on religion, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1995) claimed that everything could be done with religion, but never from religion. This view forms the background to the research question of whether and to what extent Montessori used religious arguments and theological metaphors to justify her pedagogy. Not only her writings, but also reports of an enthusiastic following give rise to this. To put it provocatively, the research question is: does Montessori propagate the belief in a certain view of the child, which can only be

followed with faith, or is there also a pedagogical argumentation in the sense of a scientific argument that Montessori uses? Does Montessori pedagogy proclaim and promise more than that it operates with pedagogical arguments? Is it a pedagogical worldview that can only be defended emotionally? The research points in two directions: on the one hand, it asks how the relationship between religion and pedagogy can be described in Montessori's writings and how much theological heritage there is in Montessori pedagogy. On the other hand, it examines if and how the reception of Montessori pedagogy in religious education continues or in forces the theological heritage.

### *Research design*

The questions are based on research in historical pedagogy on theological language in pedagogy and take its critique as a critical foil for the study of Montessori's writings on religion and pedagogy, as well as the early and current reception of Montessori in religious pedagogy.

The pedagogical critique of the theological language of pedagogy (Osterwalder 2005), dogmas (Oelkers 2005) and sacralizations (Baader 2005) was first reconstructed as a component of the research methodology. The impact of theological language in pedagogy on childhood educational processes can thus be demonstrated.

With Dietrich Benner's (2005) proposal on the differentiation of rationalities of action, another perspective was adopted in order to see religion and education as two different approaches to the world, each with its own inherent dignity. The dialogue to clarify and differentiate between theological and pedagogical-sacralizing forms of argumentation can thus be opened up for Montessori pedagogy.

One subject of the study is Montessori's numerous pedagogical writings as well as all her available texts on religion and religious education. They are analysed with regard to the use of theological ideas and religious metaphors, her image of the child, and her attitude towards religion and religious learning paths in the sense of Montessori pedagogy. In order to reconstruct the relationship between religion and pedagogy, a step-by-step passage through Montessori's writings is undertaken to illustrate Montessori's views using original quotations. German translations of Montessori's writings are used; where already published, the historical-critical new edition by Harald Ludwig is used.

Montessori education has been received in very different ways in recent years. On the basis of publications, the second part of the study analyses how the religious dimension of Montessori education has been received in the pedagogical and religious-pedagogical reception of Montessori. The aim of this investigation into the history of reception is to show how Montessori's writings are interpreted and which aspects and reasons lead to Montessori pedagogy being understood as catechesis, theological anthropology, Catholic pedagogy, religious pedagogy, or as non-theological interpretation. The methodology of this study is a historical-systematic approach to reception.

A detailed analysis and evaluation of three contemporary concepts by Cavalletti, Berg, and Berryman on religious education and upbringing in the context of Montessori education

is carried out, considering their potential benefits for religious education. Montessori's explicit religious education concept is used for both: catechetical purposes, such as First Communion preparation, and for religious education in schools. Sophia Cavalletti (1979) uses in her "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd" the liturgically orientated approach to religious education of the early Montessori. Her approach focuses on the affective resonance in the child. Montessori's approach to religious education is broader by comparison, as it also aims at the imagination and thus goes beyond affective resonance. Jerome Berryman (1995) has developed the concept of "Godly Play" for the American Sunday school since the 1970s. It draws on Cavalletti's approach and is explicitly understood as religious education based on Montessori's principles. With the intention not to teach children who God is, but to enable them to discover this on their own, Berryman fulfils a genuine characteristic of Montessori education. "Godly Play" is essentially a variant of catechetical community work and can therefore not be used in its original form in school religious education lessons that are intended to be educational and reflective. The German Protestant religious educator Horst Klaus Berg (1999) takes Montessori's distinction between implicit and explicit religious education as his starting point and continues Montessori's approach to the changed situation of religious education in the school context. He transforms Montessori's well-known sentence into: "Help me to believe for myself." With it he supports Montessori's demand for the child's own right in religious education. That's why his approach can be characterized as freedom of choice according to Montessori.

The three concepts refer to Montessori in very different ways. They can be characterized as catechesis (Cavalletti), children's church (Berryman) and religious education (Berg) according to Montessori. These concepts are analysed in terms of their views and takeovers of Montessori's approach (Neff 2016), but these results cannot be presented in detail within the scope of this article.

### *Analytical perspectives and theoretical framework*

The process of emancipating pedagogy from theology is still ongoing. The context of the relationship definition refers to the self-image of educational science and the historically grown relationship between pedagogy and religion. Religious education has increasingly incorporated educational science and general pedagogical topics in its developmental history to provide a dual scientific foundation for the discipline. However, pedagogy has tended to break off the conversation. During the Enlightenment and modernity, pedagogy was emancipated from religion. Moral concepts and pedagogical anthropologies were formulated without theological presuppositions. However, historical pedagogy indicates a linguistic, thematic, and content-related continuity of a theological heritage, as well as sacralizations in views that are understood as pedagogical.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, educational reform activities aimed at changing schools began, particularly in Western Europe and the USA. Different hopes and aspirations, experiences and concepts were articulated, so that although the term

“reform pedagogy” is used for this era, it does not represent a unified movement. Efforts to change schools include pedagogically, politically, and ideologically heterogeneous reform approaches. Primarily, this is understood to mean a school pedagogy that is described as “pedagogy from the child.” One aim of this movement was to transform receptive learning into active and self-directed learning (Link 2018: 18).

### **Argumentation: the pedagogical critique of the theological language of pedagogy**

In his analysis of the history of pedagogy, pedagogy historian Fritz Osterwalder shows that an originally religious style of speech was secularized without losing its connection to theology. According to this, the school, the teacher, or a method are given power over the entire child. This is neither pedagogically nor theologically legitimate. Osterwalder’s thesis identifies a theological language, which favours the perception as religion, but at the same time is peculiar to pedagogy. Osterwalder’s reference to theological concepts in modern pedagogy offers religious pedagogy a yardstick for distinguishing theology and pedagogy from one another.

Rather than attributing the emergence of pedagogy to Rousseau alone, as is often assumed, Osterwalder traces its roots to the development of a pedagogical theology in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, formulated as a renaissance of Augustinianism. He shows that the pedagogical tradition of French Catholic Jansenism contains text types that exhibit the pedagogical paradigm used by Rousseau and recognized as “modern.” The texts speak from a distance about what education is and how to educate, but remain in the context of theology. The authors of these devotional movements believe that education should be organized in a way that keeps people open or opens them up to the work of divine grace. According to their view, what happens inwardly in the individual is decisive for the educational process. Similar to Catholic Jansenism, numerous Protestant Pietist texts also describe how a special teacher-pupil relationship transforms the pupils’ inner self and prepares them for salvation. Augustine’s theological assumptions about the redemption of the soul and its transformation legitimize these educational writings. Therefore, they can be justified only in a theological context, according to Osterwalder’s (1992; 1995; 2005) findings.

This dogma was the belief that there was something in man, fallen through original sin, that could be changed and led to salvation through pedagogy. An approach to inwardness that has been adopted for pedagogy since Rousseau: he claims redemption through pedagogy and understands pedagogy as redemption. The theology of this argument is obvious. Osterwalder criticizes it as religion in pedagogy, not in the sense of a critique of religion, but as a critique of the method of educational science. Since the Enlightenment, educational science has seen itself as secular, but in fact uses religious patterns and arguments to justify its aims and methods. Osterwalder’s thesis is provocative because it criticizes also pedagogical concepts of the period of reform pedagogy as texts of promise that promise salvation through pedagogy. They elude argumentative criticism because they orientate

the educational process towards an absolute inwardness and an absolute end or goal. The criticized sacrality of pedagogy can be seen in the talk of the child, of the educator, who must profess and serve the child, as well as in the understanding of education as an activity that creates wholeness or perfection, which stands in contrast to the profane world.

### **Rhetoric and dogma: Myth of the child**

Osterwalder's critical thesis is supplemented by the critiques of Jürgen Oelkers. In his publication Oelkers (2005) argues that the protagonists of the so-called "reform pedagogy" from 1890 to 1930 revisited, bundled, and rhetorically reinforced traditional criticisms of schools and teaching, as well as familiar motifs. He particularly analyses the language and contexts used in this era. A rhetorical relationship is established between the "old education" and the "new education," although a thematic continuity in the discourse can be assumed. The authors simultaneously handed down and renewed journalistic postulates and arguments of school criticism and reform. The pedagogical texts themselves have an "educational" effect and are communicated in such a way that they can withstand any criticism.

The "from the child" argument was commonly used as a pedagogical formula with broad approval and great success, without recognition of its religious foundation. The authors made theoretical progress with the distinction between child and adult learning, but this aspect was overshadowed by the romanticized image of the child and the cult of its nature. The pedagogical reform "from the child's point of view" was characterized by boundless expectations, wishes, and hopes for the child, often with religious undertones. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, school reformers placed great expectations on the child, but instead of focusing on the individual child, they created a mythical image of the child that dominated the pedagogical debate. This myth portrayed the child as both mentally pure and mentally oppressed. Even the emphasis on child psychology could not dispel this myth. Child-centred education is an approach that emphasizes the nature of the child over the projections of adults. The child should determine the goodness of their upbringing and adults should orientate themselves towards the child's innocent nature. The pedagogical emphasis on nature thus simultaneously criticizes the practiced education (Oelkers 2005).

Oelkers criticizes Montessori's view of the child as a myth, as something secularly sacred, as well as her rhetoric of human development towards perfection. Montessori's idea of a teleologically orientated inner blueprint of the child, which only reveals itself to the observer and can therefore only be discovered retrospectively, is pedagogically contradictory. Despite turning away from the classical theory of substance, Oelkers also characterizes Montessori's concept of development as mythical.

In her late work *The Absorbent Mind* (1949) (Montessori 2007), Montessori avoids the paradox of pedagogical influence on the inner building plan by using a biological metaphor: the child forms the future human being out of itself by absorbing its environment. Montessori considers this realization as the true innovation of her anthropology. Oelkers

highlights Montessori's pedagogical thinking based on biological individuality as a novelty in pedagogical literature. Montessori is considered the most important representative of modern pedagogy owing to her focus on the child as the starting point for pedagogical considerations. She overcame pre-empirical doctrines of the soul and believed that education should serve the biologically based nature of the child (Oelkers 2005: 121–122).

Furthermore, Oelkers sees Montessori education as a teaching model and thus as an inductive variant of school reform that has succeeded in changing current practice. Owing to the self-education of the child, it is less a typical teaching model and more a theory of child development. According to Montessori, the child's order-creating psychological processes of change, i.e. inner change through learning, are decisive for mental growth.

### **Religious metaphors**

Meike Sophia Baader takes up Oelkers's thesis that religious expectations lie behind almost all reform pedagogical models. In her Habilitation thesis *Erziehung als Erlösung* (Education as Salvation) (Baader 2005), she shows that school reformers, in the context of modernization processes at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, received decisive impulses from a preoccupation with religion that had previously been neglected in its reception. For Baader, religion and religiosity have not disappeared from pedagogy, but appear in pedagogical concepts in a transformed form. Education is conceived as a transformation of the path of redemption, i.e. it appears with the claim of wanting to redeem people.

Baader also critically questions whether Montessori's pedagogy is a transformation of the path of redemption for a Montessori reading (Baader 2005). She focuses on Montessori's portrayal in "The Secret of Childhood" and criticizes the ideas of self-redemption conveyed by the child and her stylization as a redeemer. Through a comparison with Ellen Key's *The Century of the Child* and an analysis of *The Secret of Childhood*, Baader arrives at an interpretation of Montessori that can be reduced to the following short formula: for Montessori, education is the fulfilment of a divine mission. She thus states that the child is sacred in Montessori's work. Her criticism is directed at the level of religious linguistic metaphor.

### **Analysis of pedagogy and religion**

The initial analysis is concerned with Montessori's fundamental writings, as well as texts on religious education as liturgical education, cosmic education, and late religious writings. The second analysis concerns the reception history of Montessori's statements on religion and religious education. Each analysis examines the relationship between religion and pedagogy in Montessori's argumentation, the theological heritage in the sense of Osterwalder, dogma, rhetoric, and sacralization, Maria Montessori's personal faith, and forms of implicit or explicit religious education.

### Analysis of Montessori's writings

When analysing Montessori's lectures and writings, it was taken into account that global political circumstances and biographical situations influenced the conceptual developments and that Montessori education cannot be read as a unified work. Relevant comments on the translation or context have been considered. Revisions by Montessori are marked with the year to indicate further developments in her thinking.

The analysis of the fundamental writings takes into account the *Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook* (1914/1930/1939) (Montessori 2011), *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica applicato all'educazione infantile nelle Case dei Bambini* (1909/1913/1926/1948) (Montessori 2012) and *L'auto educazione nelle scuole elementari* (1916) (Montessori 2008). As demonstrated by the years in brackets, Montessori revised and republished these works, showcasing both further development and consistency in her ideas. Montessori's lectures on anthropology are not included in this analysis. Other excluded texts increasingly describe psychological development, such as *The Absorbent Mind* (1949). Similarly, the texts on Peace and Education, mainly written in the 1930s, are also not included. The work "The Secret of Childhood" combines religious metaphors with the physiological and psychological development of the child and is closely linked to the debates of school reformers.

Before conducting the analysis, a bibliographical and chronological survey of Montessori's texts on explicit religious education was performed. The analysis includes only writings that are not exclusively oriented towards the liturgy. The selected texts demonstrate that an orientation towards the liturgy of the Catholic Church is one fundamental aspect of Montessori's religious thoughts. During the interpretation process, it was considered that some of the texts are transcripts of Montessori's oral lectures and translations.

Under the heading *Religious Education as Liturgical Education*, nine lectures and writings by Montessori have been compiled which explicitly focus on practical religious education according to the Montessori method, the life of children in the church, general principles of religious education and the relationship between God and the child. The focus of the contributions is on the 1930s, but the publication period extends from 1913 to 1946. There are only two lectures from 1935 and 1945 on the connection between religious education and cosmic education. Montessori emphasizes the position of humans in creation and the cosmic task of taking responsibility for creation, preserving the unity of humankind, and assisting the weak. Two other well-known texts that refer to religious education and the confession of faith are *La preghiera – The Prayer* (1944/1949) and *The Mirror of the World* (1950), a conversation between Montessori and E.M. Standing, published by Standing after Montessori's death in 1958 (Montessori 2023). The text presents statements that require critical evaluation owing to idealizations and a pre-conciliar understanding of the Catholic Church. Additionally, there are interesting reflections on the Catholic Church as a social organism and its focus on marginalized groups of people.

### **Analysis of reception: religion in Montessori's approach**

A report of the reception of Montessori education as religious education can be found in Günter Schulz-Benesch (1962) for the period from 1920 to around 1960. Additional reviews of this Montessori interpretation can be found in Franz-Michael Konrad (1997), Andrea Kabus (2001), and Harald Ludwig (2008). Different phases of reception can be identified: prior to 1960, Montessori education had little impact on religious education. Since then, there have been observation reports and publications by Helene Helming. They were not utilized in religious education lessons in schools. But Helming influenced a Montessori reception that refers to her religious anthropology. Furthermore, since the early 1980s, Montessori pedagogy has also been incorporated into concepts of religious education owing to the resurgence of reform pedagogical concepts in school pedagogy. The late adoption of Montessori's approach in religious education can be attributed to several factors, including the negative attitude of some Catholic educators, delayed publication of explicit religious education writings in German, the need for a new beginning for Montessori education after the Second World War, and the lack of working materials.

For this part of analysis, only authors who refer to the entire Montessori pedagogy are selected. They interpreted the approach with consideration of Montessori's statements on religion and religious education. The selected authors or concepts are divided following their kind of interpretation.

As a catechetical and religious-pedagogy method, there are some examples: the Spanish priest of Barcelona who inspired Montessori to reflect on religious anthropology and to develop the explicitly religious concept. František Tomášek, a Czech cardinal and professor of religious education, published in 1940 a work titled *The Active School and Religious Instruction with Consideration of Maria Montessori's Method*. Helene Helming, a professor and founder of a German Montessori Association that emphasizes the Catholic background – she inspired many people with Montessori's approach. Helming sees the distancing from experimental psychology in favour of a Christian understanding of individuality and the soul's striving for independence as a change in Montessori's work. The French religious educator of Polish descent Héléne Lubienska de Lenval recognized in Montessori, education principles common to the monastic tradition, e.g. self-activity and silence. For her religious pedagogy, she also adopted the organization of the environment and free movement as well as: the naturally given disposition to observational contemplation, to which religious pedagogy should not remain indifferent (Lubienska de Lenval 1946). Lubienska de Lenval influenced the reception of Montessori's religious education in Germany. In the 1970s, methodological and didactic elements of Montessori education were adopted for a concept of Catholic independent schools in southern Germany, the so-called Marchtaler Plan. Both Christian anthropology (every child is a unique creature) and Montessori's anthropology (self-realization, becoming master of oneself in freedom) provided the impetus for the structure elements: freedom, work, silence, cosmic education, peace education, the "sensitive phases," prepared environment, and social learning.



As “propaganda” text in the sense of Osterwalder, there is one obvious example: it is the publication of Edwin Mortimer Standing’s *Maria Montessori. Her Life and Work* (1959). Standing expresses his admiration for the personality and charisma of Montessori, although he wanted to fulfil Montessori’s wish for a systematic presentation of her principles and practice with this publication.

The Dutchman Buytendijk has been highly regarded within German Catholic pedagogy, e.g. by Josef Schröteler (1929), and is one of the outstanding representatives of “Catholic educational science” on an international level. In philosophical-phenomenological analyses, he reflects on the problems of freedom and attachment as well as the pedagogical promotion of moral freedom. He interprets Montessori education as a successful contribution to solving these issues.

Representatives of an interpretation of Montessori as a theological anthropology can be found in Paul Oswald und Hildegard Holtstiege. Both had a major influence on the understanding of Montessori education in Germany. Ulrich Steenberg (1998) interprets Montessori’s writings on religious education as an existential-symbolic approach, starting in the 1990s. Tanja Pütz (2005) compares the polarization of attention with meditation and regards Montessori’s approach as religious pedagogy.

Three recent dissertations are used as examples for a non-theological interpretation: Martin Pranieß (2008) concerns the religious-ideological background of Montessori in the service of her pedagogy. Kyung Sun Koo (2008) offered a discussion about *The dignity of the child* and reflected the position of the child in the pedagogical and religious anthropology of Montessori. Mansoon Ahn (2008) compares the modern concept of the person with the dignity of the child in Montessori’s pedagogical and religious anthropology.

## Findings

The bibliographical record of Montessori’s lectures and writings on religion already demonstrates that religion and religious education are integral parts of Montessori pedagogy.

The debate began in 1910, when Spanish priests discovered the Christian principles of Montessori’s education, written down in *Il Metodo* (1909). They gave Maria Montessori the impetus to take up this idea, to consider it significant, and to develop it further. The priests turned to Montessori education out of a pedagogical interest. They interpreted the following principles of Montessori education as religious education: the attitude of the teacher, self-activity, sensory training, silence, concentration, freedom, dealing with mistakes, and loving respect for the child. Montessori subsequently developed and systematized a concept of explicit religious education. She put it into practice later at the *House of Children in the Church*, a atrium in Barcelona, in collaboration with the community of priests.

### *Findings from Montessori's writings*

The text analysis shows that Montessori used the theological language of pedagogy, metaphors and sacralizations of the child in her writings. The theological language of Montessori's pedagogy is evident from the very first pages of her handbook. Montessori wants to explore the mystery of the child, discover its soul, or liberate the child's personality and bring it to development. According to Osterwalder, access to the child is through an absolute order that is presumed to exist within the child. Educational measures such as a prepared environment, freedom of choice, developmental materials and exercises are intended to bring out what is hidden in the soul. It can therefore be said that Montessori did not finally escape the absolutizing dynamics of pedagogical-theological language. She does not reduce an empirical-sensualist approach to human beings to the sum of their experiences gathered through sensory impressions and available to their consciousness, but at the same time refers to the needs of the human soul and the mystery of individuality.

In going through Montessori's writings on religion and religious education – from the lecture *On Moral and Religious Education* (1913) to *La preghiera* (1952) – three questions were addressed: how does Montessori organize and arrange the environment and materials for religious education? What concept of religious education does she develop, and what is its goal according to Montessori? Lastly, what pedagogical arguments and language does she use? (Neff 2016: 236).

The result shows: in her early phase, Montessori understands religious education as liturgical education. It opens up faith to the child through action and the playful re-enactment of the liturgy, e.g. in the atrium, in short: through the church into the church. It is denominational in character and thus stands in contrast to the view of many reform pedagogues, e.g. Ellen Key, who argued in favour of non-denominational religious education because the child would not understand the abstract teachings of the catechisms. Montessori also stood in contrast to the catechetical teaching common at the time and introduced a new approach to religious education that was based on respect for children and their freedom. In the concept of cosmic education, Montessori represents a more universalistic view of religious education.

Even in her later writings, she remains true to the idea that education should take place from the child and that the educator fulfils a religious service by serving the mystery of the child. A perfect upbringing can only succeed if God is recognized in the child. God reveals himself in the child. The aim of education should be to preserve the grace of God in the child. The child is purified through baptism. Through free action and self-activity, it perfects its inner laws, which open up access to God. The teacher should treat the child with humility and respect.

The analysis of religion in Montessori's writings has shown that the child's process of becoming a human being is of crucial importance to her. She does not leave the child's development into a human being to God's act of salvation, but argues for the right behaviour and the right way for the educator to treat the child based on the developmental

characteristics. Montessori describes the child's incarnation in pedagogical terms and uses the theological figure of argument inherent in pedagogy.

Montessori's texts on religious education contain a variety of practical suggestions. In accordance with the prepared environment and free choice of work, Montessori advocates for a development-oriented approach in methodical variance. This includes suggestions for sensory materials, exercises of practical life, exercises of silence, content-related development materials, stories, ideas for creating a personal prayer book or missal, theatre plays (cf. *The Mystical Drama*), and instructions and guidance on material development. When designing the prepared environment and developing materials, it is important to analyse difficulties in an age-appropriate manner according to sensitive periods and, if necessary, didactically reduce them. This approach is described in the texts about the analysis of difficulties in religious education (1939) and in analysis of difficulties in learning to pray (1956/1964) (Montessori 2023).

### ***Montessori approach and its relationship to Religion***

On the basis of numerous receptions of Montessori pedagogy, it is evident that Montessori's approach has been discussed in various ways regarding religious education. This ranges from the comprehension and misunderstanding of Montessori pedagogy as a catechetical method, prophetic proclamation, Christian educational theory, Christian anthropology, and indirect religious education, to the reversal in de-theologizing interpretations of Montessori's writings. Even if there are different understandings of religious education, the recipients employ Montessori's view of the child and her teaching principles, and utilize them in religious education up to the current time. The receptions show that Montessori is often interpreted as a witness to Catholic pedagogy.

Buytendijk (1990) views Montessori education as an education in humility. He develops this theological concept from the Christian doctrine of virtue (humility) not theologically, but pedagogically. Voluntary obedience does not come about through the imposition of external laws or foreign authorities, but only through relative freedom and an attitude of humility. In his work, pedagogical propaganda and theological language go hand in hand, a process that can also be found some years later in Schulz-Benesch (1962; 1990).

The Jesuit Schröteler (1929) searched for an educational method in line with the Catholic Church. His detailed analysis of numerous features of Montessori education served as the starting point for the adoption of Montessori education in Catholic education, particularly in the field of early childhood education. For him, education according to Montessori means an analogy to the natural religiosity of the human being, namely the development of the inner life forces in the child that are waiting for an impulse: the development of the will and the spirit with the aim that the will guides the actions. In practice, he emphasizes the principle of the child's freedom within the limits of obedience, the prepared environment, and the provision of objects through which the inner forces should come to light.

For example, one interpretation of Montessori pedagogy as a catechetical method is provided by František Tomášek (1940). His position shows the benefits that can be drawn for religious education from the principle of active schooling and religious instruction according to the Montessori method. The author's catechetical considerations take up the concerns of the papal encyclicals at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are therefore set in a contemporary context. The liturgical movement propagated an increased focus on children, which is what Tomášek searched for: a child-oriented method of catechesis. The author pleads for a lifelike teaching of the faith based on the letters of the apostles. He appreciates Montessori's approach to religious education as a means of original Christian catechesis because it honours the physical, emotional, and spiritual development of the child. Like Montessori, he is convinced: children need to be able to express their personal faith. The atrium provides a suitable environment for the spiritual growth of children.

The publication of *Standing* (1959) is proof that Montessori's speeches can be seen as prophetic proclamations: he writes that Montessori described the discovery of the powers in the child as a work of providence. He thus follows her self-portrayal and self-assessment, according to which her discovery of the child has the character of a revelation. He not only expresses his own religiosity in the text, but also Montessori's personal sense of vocation. Despite Montessori's sense of mission and the religious interpretation of Montessori education, *Standing* also refers to her objective scientific spirit of research: she was able to separate religion and metaphysics, was scientific and mystical. *Standing* regards Montessori education as a religious path for both: the child and the teacher. The child is described religiously through the assumption of an immortal soul and is reflected pedagogically in the light of this religious argument. The orientation towards the mysterious inwardness of the child serves as a point of reference for education, which is geared towards normalization as the absolute ultimate goal. The teacher's personal attitude and view of the child should be orientated towards something higher and based on the beliefs of "Montessorianism." The term "Montessorianism" characterizes the type of followers who have developed a cult of personality around Maria Montessori and her work and can be characterized as a religious community.

Before and after the Second World War, Helene Helming had a significant influence on the reception and practical realization of Montessori education in Germany. She and subsequently her students Günter Schulz-Benesch and Paul Oswald focused in particular on the religious content of Montessori education. Schulz-Benesch interprets Montessori as a pedagogical concept from a Catholic perspective and with an educational purpose, i.e. in a theological sense. Bollnow also describes Montessori education as a kind of "awakening" and Böhm discusses it in the context of grace (Neff 2016: 484–494). Paul Oswald (1987) and Hildegard Holtstiege (1999) review Montessori's view of the child as determined by an anthropology orientated towards Catholic dogma. Oswald was not interested in the level of language, but in Montessori's core ideas about the child, from which the educational consequences are derived. Focusing on anthropology, he notes an overlap with Western Christian-Catholic anthropology.

The more recent works by Steenberg (1998; 2008) and Pütz (2005) understand Montessori education – in a nutshell – as indirect religious education. Montessori assumed that a religious dimension would emerge through the child as a subject for development support. According to Montessori, religious education requires self-activity, self-reflection about moral questions, self-reflection (thinking about oneself and the value of one's own life), the search for meaning and religious realization. According to Pütz (2005: 307), these terms characterize Montessori's concept of religion.

Non-theological readings can be found in relation to cosmic education in Pranieß (2008) and in relation to Montessori's anthropology in Mansoon Ahn (2008). The presentation of the history of the reception literature on religion in Montessori's approach has only been touched on here, but the insights nevertheless show that the reception has adopted Montessori's religious language and in places even reinforced it.

### **Gain in knowledge**

The receptions, for instance of Standing and Buytendijk, make it apparent that the texts and lectures of Montessori served as a form of preaching or "pedagogical propaganda" as defined by Osterwalder. It is evident that Maria Montessori dedicated her life to advocating the rights of children and promoting their independence from adults. With this endeavour, Montessori argues in the pedagogical view of the child. She demands, for example, respect, humility, and observation, but not know-it-all mentality, for the teacher's attitude towards the child. She justifies this behaviour of the educator in different ways, i.e. not only in terms of developmental psychology or pedagogy, but also theologically: respect for the child is due to God in the child, because God reveals himself in every child. Respect for the child is then no longer based on pedagogical appreciation or consideration of the child's individuality and developmental psychological needs, but rather on the encounter with God in the child. The child is sacralized. The theological argumentation has a lasting effect on the way the child is treated.

The reception of Montessori pedagogy in religious education is often influenced by a theological interpretation of her work. Some aspects or the entirety of her concept are seen as having an affinity with the theological tradition. Montessori's writings and lectures are sometimes regarded as religious texts.

Today's Montessori pedagogy largely lacks a contemporary take on religion. It thus meets the criticism of the theological language of education. After analysing the theological heritage, impulses from Montessori pedagogy can be named for today's religious pedagogy, e.g. the orientation of religious pedagogy towards the child's access to the world; a more modest goal than the redemption of the child through pedagogy.

Clear differentiation between pedagogy and religion within Montessori education can prevent pedagogical dogmas and the sacralization of pedagogical practices, methods, teacher roles, and room design. Even today, the dissemination of innovative pedagogical

ideas, methods or concepts often leads to the belief that this is the “only correct” concept. The analysis illustrates how using theological language in pedagogy and transmitting sacralizing dogmas can affect perceptions of childhood as well as beliefs and convictions in educational practices. Its objective is to encourage self-critical reflection on personal notions of educational practice alongside childhood and education.

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