Religious self-socialization

How are young people influenced by the peer-group and electronic media in their (non-) religious development?

By Manfred L. Pirner

Young people are influenced in their world-views and religious opinions by the life-world they experience outside religious education at schools or in religious communities. In the modern world, youth cultures and the media have become increasingly important for them und function as agencies of socialization. However, as research shows, young people tend to use youth cultures and the media culture in quite individual and self-determined ways, which has prompted sociologists to speak of ?self-socialization?. The paper explores some main areas of religious self-socialization with a focus on western culture. It tries to show that religious self-socialization constitutes an important context for any efforts of religious education which should be taken into account by religious educators.

1. Socialization - self-socialization - religious socialization

Socialization is generally understood as the process by which young people find their identity as participating members of a society. Although there are many socialization theories the following core definition by German sociologist Klaus Hurrelmann certainly represents a broad consensus. He defines socialization as the process of generation and development of the human personality depending on and interacting with the social and material life conditions" in a certain society (Hurrelmann 1995, 114 [translation: MP.]). While in the 1970. the emphasis in socialization theory and research was on the influence society exerts on individuals, the emphasis has shifted to the *(inter-)active and constructive aspect of* socialization over the past thirty years. Researchers point out, in particular, that young people are not "passive recipients of external social forces" but rather active participants in the construction of their own social lives and identities? (Buckingham 1993, 14). Hurrelmann has coined the influential notion of the young person as "a subject who productively processes reality" (Hurrelmann 1983). Since the 1980. the concept of *"self-socialization" has been used by some authors in* order to indicate this general shift of perspective in socialization theory on the one

hand, and on the other hand to point to specific areas in which young people acquire cultural knowledge and social behaviour quite autonomously - without adult educators - such as in popular culture and in diverse youth cultures (Zinnecker 2000). The notion seems to be more prominent in the German than in the Anglo-American context.

Looking at religious socialization in Western Europe, the empirical evidence over the past decades has shown a significant decline of the importance of the family and the church communities as socializing agents. This development is generally seen to be linked with processes of secularization as well as increasing pluralism and individualism. However, it sometimes seems that in such analyses new fields of religious socialization such as popular media culture and youth cultures are neglected. I will argue in this paper that religious education discourse and research should devote more attention to the religious self-socialization processes in those two areas (see also Pirner 2009d).

2. How the media influence young people's religious views - an example

Let me present an illustrative example. In her famous international bestselling book, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, Barbara Robinson tells the story of the Herdmans, the "absolutely worst kids in the history of the world", who nevertheless are supposed to take part in this year's Christmas pageant. However, as they have never heard the biblical Christmas story, it has to be read out to them and some other children by the mother of one of the latter.

"And, lo, the Angel of the Lord came upon them," Mother went on, "and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and -"

"Batman!" Gladys (Herdman) yelled, flinging her arms out and smacking the kid next to her.

"What?" Mother said. Mother never read "Amazing Comics".

"Out of the black night with horrible vengeance came Batman-"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Gladys," Mother said. "This is the Angel of the Lord who comes to the shepherds in the fields, and -"

"Out of nowhere, right?" Gladys said. "In the black night, right?"

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"Well ..." Mother looked unhappy. "In a way."

So Gladys sat back down, looking very satisfied, as if this was at least one part of the Christmas story that made sense to her.

This fictional episode illustrates nicely what is a frequent experience in 'real-life' religious education classes in Germany: A lot of children and youngsters today lack basic knowledge of religious traditions, and when they encounter religious figures and stories they make sense of them from the background of their experiences with media figures and stories which are so familiar to them. Sociological and educational studies point out that the socialization of young people in modern western societies today is to a considerable extent media socialization, and that their life-world is partly a media world. Consequently, the media influence their way of looking at the world and understanding it. Or, to put it differently, they actively use their media experiences to make sense of the world.

Looking at the Herdman episode more closely, it becomes clear, that Gladys' association of Batman with the Christmas angel is not entirely incidental. As is well known, Batman - just as his 'brothers' Superman, Spiderman or He-Man - is not just a secular comics or film figure but has himself quasi-religious dimensions: with the help of supernatural powers he continually rescues good from evil and eventually, almost sacrificing his own life, saves the world. In this light, it seems that Gladys' way of understanding the Christmas angel in analogy to Batman was not that misleading. Numerous hermeneutic and analytical studies from various scholarly disciplines over the past decades have shown that the Batman figure is only one of many examples of religious or quasi-religious elements and structures in popular media culture (for overviews see e.g. Pimer 2001; Cobb 2005; Forbes/Mahan 2005; Mazur/McCarthy 2010). A high number of media stories tend to be structured like religious redemption dramas with good superheroes like Batman fighting the evil. Media stories also tend to deal with the great human questions that are usually regarded as religious questions and are generally not discussed in our rational everyday communication: Where do we come from? Where do we go? What is the meaning of life? Is there a meaning in suffering? Is there something like destiny? Is there a reality beyond the one we can perceive?

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What is right or wrong and how can we know? - Furthermore, media stories deal with basic human feelings such as fear, aggression, and love, often using symbolic language that is derived from religious traditions. Recent studies show that the presence of religion in popular culture refers not only to Christianity but extends to Islam and Eastern religions as well (see Weintraub 2010).

However, it would be too simple to say that the media directly influence their users into adopting the world views or moral attitudes presented in them. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the media in young people's lives and religious development, it will be necessary to take at least a short look at some major results of empirical media studies.

3. How do the media influence young people? Some results from media research

3.1 Media reception is an active, constructive process

Media users are not as passive as we are usually inclined to think. Research shows that they approach the media with their individual predispositions, pre-conceptions, experiences, social contexts and habits of reception, with their subjective questions and needs, so that everyone interprets and constructs meaning for him- or herself differently. Especially children and youngsters actively use the media for coping with life situations and with the challenges of their biographical development, e.g. for working on their identity formation, developing their attitude towards the other sex, finding and retaining friendships or dealing with problematic family situations. Often unconsciously, they look for orientation in the media also in respect to moral and religious issues and *choose* those media productions or elements which they feel meet their needs best (see e.g. Bryant/Oliver 2009).

3.2 Family and friends first, then the media

Unanimously, research findings point out that close social relationships such as family and friends are in general still more important for young people than the media and media persons. This means that for religious and moral questions the family and the peer group still remain the first and most informing influences. However, the media can have reinforcing, moderating and sometimes even decisive impacts on young people. And media persons can play a considerably

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important part for young people's lives as role models or dream figures into which they can project their wishes and longings. They can identify with certain media persons and ask themselves what this or that film hero would have done in the situation they are in now. Media researchers call the special relationship some people develop towards media persons "para-social interaction", which means that those people tend to interact with media persons in their minds almost as if they were real (see e.g. Barthelmes/Sander 2001).

3.3 Media influences are neither uniform nor irresistible

Especially in the research about the effects of media violence, scholars found that there is no direct one-way effect which makes all viewers of media violence more aggressive and violent. Empirical studies have shown that some viewers, mainly males, mainly *those* who are less intelligent and those who come from a problematic social background, tend to become more aggressive when watching violent films. But others, mainly females, mainly those who are intelligent and those who come from a positive social background, when watching the same violent films tend to become even more peaceful and despise violence even more than before. The latter seem to identify more with the victims of violence and develop more sympathy with them than with the violent person (see Kunczik/Zipfel 2006; Kirsh 2006). This empirical evidence again emphasizes the importance of the individuals' social contexts, their biographies, experiences and attitudes for the kind of effects certain media productions have on them.

One preliminary conclusion for religious education which can be drawn from the media research results is that educational processes do seem to have the chance of supporting the young people in developing a more reflective, pro-social and media-competent way of dealing with the media culture that surrounds them. Social learning and ethics education, which are both a substantial part of religious education, can influence young people's predispositions for using media. Together with the integration of media education into school education in general and into religious education in particular, the cultivation of a more reflective, pro-social and competent   use of media seems possible.

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4. How do the media influence young people's religiosity? Some more results from empirical research

Although empirical studies on the relationship between media use and religiosity are still few, there has been some progress in this field over the past twenty years. In general (German) religious education research, there have been some hints recently that children use the media as a source for constructing their religious ideas. For instance, the qualitative study of Hanisch (1996) on the development of children's ways of drawing pictures of God shows that some children use pictures from cowboy or war films to draw their image of God (Hanisch 1996, 128), and Freudenberger-Loetz (2006, 187) found that some children refer to ghost films when they try to express their idea of life after death.

Based on George Gerbner's cultivation theory (Gerbner 1984) and building on a Scottish study done by Gibson (1992) I conducted a quantitative investigation among 302 German 14-15 year-olds (Pirner 2004; 2009b). The youngsters were asked about their TV preferences including genres such as mystery, horror and fantasy films, and about a range of para-religious and religious ideas and attitudes. The study showed that there were several significant correlations between TV preferences and religious orientation. What was particularly striking was that we found by far more correlations among the girls than among the boys. This may indicate that the girls tend to be more strongly influenced by television in their religious attitudes than the boys, which is supported by findings that, in general, more girls than boys believe in horoscopes, ghosts, and so forth. However, the results may also be interpreted as showing that the girls tend to select more reflectively those television genres that correspond with their religious beliefs than the boys do. Most correlations clustered around the genre horror/mystery and tended to show the highest values there: Those girls who showed a preference for horror/mystery films were more likely to believe in supernatural phenomena, in ghosts, in possible contact with the dead and in aliens already living on earth and had a more negative image of God than the others (Pirner 2009b, 285). There was also a correlation between myster/horror-preference and belief in aliens among the boys, whereas preference for information and news shows correlated negatively

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with para-religious beliefs among girls and boys. A quite plausible interpretation of these results can be based on the cultivation theory perspective that the strongest effects of television on viewers can be expected in those cases where television reality differs most from everyday reality, which obviously applies for the fantastic film genres. In horror and mystery films mostly wicked supernatural powers and extraterrestrial beings play an important role. On the other hand, it is also quite intelligible that information genres contribute to an enlightened, rational view of the world and thus hamper the development of para-religious beliefs.

The study design, with only one testing point, does not permit to claim the verification of an effect of the media on their users in a strict sense. It can only support the hypothesis that there are such effects by pointing to the reported correlations. Remembering that media users in general are not passive recipients but actively choose and construct meaning from what they perceive in the media, any influence from the media should not be regarded as a uni-directional effect, but rather as the result of an interdependent process of selection, media effect, and active acquisition by the recipient.

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

Also, Clark's results reaffirm the view that the relationship between media and religious beliefs is not simply one of media effects but a more complex, reciprocal, and multi-faceted one having to do with what she calls "the blurring of boundaries" between the stories of traditional religion and those of popular media culture (Clark 2003, 230). Relying mainly on the young people's self-interpretation,

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she emphasizes the tendency that the media stories are not taken seriously by the young viewers and that most of them "do not consciously seek information about the supernatural from the media." (Clark 2003, 227). Perhaps my own findings can contribute to challenging even more than Clark does the teenagers' conviction that "they are unlikely to have their minds changed about what they do believe" by the media (Clark 2003, 227f.).

Another piece of evidence for media effects on their users' beliefs is offered by studies in the field of TV fan clubs. It seems obvious that whenever media users identify strongly with a certain TV series or film, watch it regularly and enthusiastically, and form social communities around it, this media product's influence on its fans can be expected to be especially strong. The probably most prominent example of this is the fan community of the American science fiction TV series "Star Trek". On internet sites or in fanzines in the USA as well as in Germany some of them "confess" that Star Trek has literally changed their life and helped them through troubles and depression, and that Star Trek "was and will always be the most significant influence in my life" (Jewett/Lawrence 1977, 30; see also Hellmann/Klein 1997, 25 - 44). In particular, the TV series seems to convey a positive, hopeful utopian perspective that in the future all nations and peoples can live together in freedom, peace, mutual respect and helpfulness. This includes respect for the other's religion or non-religious world view. An empirical study at the University of Bonn found evidence that fans strongly endorse typical Star Trek values such as tolerance, helpfulness and respect toward strangers including respect for diverse religions (Volkskundliches Seminar der Universität Bonn 2005).

In 2007 two major German qualitative studies were published that were also able to demonstrate influences of the media on young people's religious orientations. Astrid Dinter investigated adolescents' use of computers and found that general user experiences, as well as the contents of some computer games, can imply religious dimensions in a wide sense (Dinter 2007). Jörg Herrmann (2007) conducted biographical interviews with 20 young adults on possible religious aspects in their reception of television, movie films, and books. Many of the interviewees seem to use the media as a source of dealing with the existential, moral and religious questions of life. Mostly this media use appears to constitute a

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functional equivalent of religion which substitutes religion, but sometimes the media also seem to offer bridges to religion. For instance, Herrmann reports the case of 39-year-old Hans, whose regular viewing of the TV series "Kung Fu" in his adolescence lead him to read books on Buddhism, attend seminars, and practice Buddhist meditation up to the present day (Herrmann 2007, 257).

Two recent *experimental* studies support the assumption that the findings concerning media violence, as reported above (section 2), also apply to religious aspects in the media: The way in which religion in the media is perceived and consequently which effects media have on religious views seems to depend much on the predisposition of the recipient. Zywek (2007) showed the film "The DaVinci Code", based on Dan Brown's bestselling book, to 58 Persons, about half of them practicing Catholics, the other half non-Catholics or agnostics. In a prae-post design (interviews before and after the film) it turned out that, faced with the church-critical tendencies of the film, the pro-Church attitude of the Catholics was reinforced while the non-Catholics and agnostics saw the church clearly more negatively after the film (see also Pirner 2009c).

BirtePlatow (2008) showed two films about God, "Dogma" (USA 1999, directed by Kevin Smith) and "Bruce Almighty" (USA 2003, directed by Tom Shadyac), to an audience of thirteen persons. With the help of subsequent narrative and guided interviews she found out that the test persons were stimulated by the films to think about their own conceptions of God, to differentiate and modify them in very individual ways, but also to reaffirm their own views by critically rejecting some elements or even the main intention of the films.

5. How do peer cultures influence young people's religiosity?

As mentioned above, the concept of self-socialization has gained increasing plausibility in the sociological context in the face of youth cultures or "scenes" which are largely independent from adults and often imply an anti-establishment impetus. In such mostly loose and temporary forms of community, young people organize themselves, choose certain elements from pop culture or historical cultural traditions to form a more or less coherent subcultural orientation and define borderlines against the cultural mainstream as well as other subcultural groups. It

is in such contexts that self-socialization takes place, which means that young people acquire cultural knowledge and cultural "capital" in a very self-determined way through informal learning processes and without educational assistance. In youth cultures young people learn almost exclusively from their peers. That this also touches on the field of religious socialization, should find more attention in the field of religious education scholarship.

As one telling example of a youth culture with a well recognisable profile in Germany I will sketch some characteristics of the Gothics or the "black scene" as they are sometimes called. The Gothics are known for wearing black clothes and emphasizing death and human transience in their symbolic self-representation. Their style in clothing, hairdressing, music and dance serves as a means of distinction against the "normal". Characteristic symbols are the cross, skulls, vampires and skeletons, which indicates that within Gothic youth culture mainly medieval and romantic traditions are used as resources for creating a specific symbolic universe. The Gothics' favourite meeting places are ruins, old buildings, cemeteries and of course also discos and youth clubs that offer a Gothic-style environment. The perhaps most substantial characteristic of the Gothics scene is the ideal of reflectivity, which means that the scene members claim to reflect more deeply and without taboos about life including its existential and religious dimensions. This ideal is upheld against perceived tendencies of a superficial kind of "happiness" or feel-good mentality in mainstream culture or other youth cultures such as the Techno or HipHop scene. Two exemplary quotations from two qualitative studies among Gothics can demonstrate this point.

"Perhaps Goths think more intensely about things and reflect more about events than normal people do." (Sprio 2008, 48; interviewee: Anne, 20 years old; translation: MP).

The Gothic scene "do not shut their eyes against painful or complicated themes and still have a feeling for the beautiful things in life. But they do not accept taboos, not with regard to sexuality, not with regard to religion, not with regard to ideology, there are no taboos for the black scene, except if something is hollow, meaning-less, superficial. Superficiality is a taboo in the black scene." (Schmidt/Neumann-

Braun 2008, 20r; interviewee: Manfred, passage 39; translation: MP)

In the context of this kind of taboo-less reflectivity which includes religious questions and topics, there is a great tolerance as to the Goths? different religious or non-religious orientations as the following quotations illustrate:

"No question we also have Christians among us and the fewest of us don't believe in anything. True, not only in God but also in ghosts or similar things ..." (Sprio 2008, 38; interviewee: Sina, 20 years old; translation: MP).

"What is another general fact across all Goths is that they try to find something that is between heaven and earth and that cannot be proven by touching, seeing or similar scientific methods. They all look for something else [...] and that doesn't have to be Jesus Christ. It could be, they wouldn't exclude that, and some say: for me, that's my thing, and still they are Gothic ..." (Schmidt/Neumann-Braun 2008, 245; interviewee: Manfred, passage 27; translation: MP).

To sum up, three main aspects can be found in the Gothic youth culture. Firstly, the search and openness for some kind of belief in a higher or deeper reality belongs to core of the Gothic identity in line with the emphasis on reflectivity and existential depth. Secondly, in the field of religion as well as in other thematic fields, Gothics appreciate and underline the individual's autonomy, which implies a largely critical stance towards institutionalized religion, religious authorities and "ready-made" religious answers. Thirdly, research reveals a remarkably tolerant, open and appreciative attitude towards personal religious faith or religiosity which is perceived to contrast with superficial or anti-religious attitudes in mainstream culture or other youth cultures.

Schmidt and Neumann-Braun (2008) conclude from such findings that the Gothics scene mainly serves as a temporary home for young people with a more traditional (Christian) and bourgeois kind of background who look for their own way in life beyond unquestioned conformity with their traditional social, religious or anti-religious background. The Gothic scene is thus one example of a kind of religious self-socialization that takes place among peers in youth cultures. And it should be noted that in most popular youth cultures besides the Gothic scene, such as techno or hip-hop, religion or religious elements play an important role.

However, obviously the different youth cultures are attractive for different milieus of young people. For instance, Claudia Lübcke (2007) points out that young muslims in Germany can hardly be found in the Gothic or techno scenes but rather prefer the Hip Hop culture, because it seems to be a better cultural frame to allow for ethnical and religious variety. Up to now there is some literature on the religious dimensions of youth cultures (see e.g. Hitzler/Niederbacher 2010; Lüthe 2008; Göttlich 2007; Szagun 2002), but little empirical research on their effect on the religious (self-)socialization and development of young people.

6. Conclusion

How are young people in western countries influenced in their religiosity by the peer-group and the electronic media? The answer to this question and some consequences can finally be summed up in five empirically supported hypotheses.

1 - As a sphere of life that is not under educational control, media culture and youth cultures contribute to the young people's autonomy by constituting a space of self-socialization. This self-socialization clearly includes religious dimensions and aspects.

2 - The influence of media and peers on the young people's religious development should not be regarded as a one-way effect, but rather as an interactive, constructive and social process: The young persons choose to use certain media products, they select and interpret what they perceive in the media, and these choosing, selecting and interpreting processes are moderated by their social contexts in families, peer-groups and youth cultures.

3 - As general tendencies of media culture and most youth cultures concerning religion we can identify individualization, transformation and pluralization. Individualization is based on the possibility of individual choices and is therefore connected with pluralism. It generally also goes along with distancing processes from traditions and institutions. However, the empirical evidence shows neither complete individualization (but rather new forms of community) nor complete secularization (but rather the transformation of religious elements and perspectives, so that in some sense "religion" is transmitted outside institutionalized religion).

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4 - The media culture as well as youth cultures can take a two-fold role concerning traditional and institutionalized religion: They can serve as substitutes of it; because young people can use media culture as a resource of dealing with existential and religious questions, they no longer need religion; or also: because they are not familiar with religion any longer, they use the media culture as a resource. Or media culture and youth cultures can serve as bridges to religion; because media culture and youth cultures keep young people's religiosity alive outside institutionalized religion, so that they retain an openness towards it.

5 - Religiosity in media culture and youth cultures often takes on experimental, provocative, syncretistic and para-religious shapes. To some extent they mirror the situation of religion in a post-secular society, but they also constitute a "liminal" space for young people to find their way in the transitional process from childhood to adulthood, from their family traditions into an open, pluralistic society. It is my conviction that religious education should regard it as one major task to accompany such self-socialization processes in a critical and constructive way (see Pirner 2009a).

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