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dissertation entitled

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SELF-ESTEEM IN
THE PEDAGOGY OF RELIGION - WITH
SPECIAL ATTENTION TO CHRISTIAN
EDUCATION OF TEENAGERS IN BIBLE
CLASS**

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The dissertation approaches the religious-pedagogical significance of self-evaluation, concerning the period of adolescence in particular. The thesis, after exploring the psychological functioning of self-evaluation, presents the emphases of the biblical image of self-evaluation, and the relevant, important particularities of the religious socialization process. Finally, the dominant trends of religious education theory are scrutinized with regard to the appearance of the importance of the students' self-evaluation in them. Based on these, the following summary conclusions can be formulated:

- 1. The source of human internal stability, self-evaluation, and self-esteem are to be found - counter to the general psychological approach - in an external reference point, which is God's unconditional acceptance in love.** The ultimate stability of man is granted by this ultimate sense of dependence. The key to fair self-evaluation and stable self-esteem is the inner balance of self-love, charity, and divine love. In pedagogy of religion, the biblical picture of human existence is to be conveyed to the students with this balance of the threefold love in mind, by strengthening their own worth and by being attentive to their individual needs and to their situation. At Bible classes, the question of self-evaluation can not only be present as a topic, but it can also determine the

processes of religious education and the way of witnessing the gospel.

2. **In our terminology, we should be attentive to use realistic or unrealistic self-evaluation as a term instead of "low" or "high" self-esteem and to label self-esteem with stable or labile adjectives.** Self-evaluation and self-esteem are interrelated and sometimes hardly distinguishable concepts, often referred to in the literature as synonyms. Self-evaluation is an act of self-qualification based on our own abilities, modes of action and behavior, while self-esteem is a stable element of identity. Self-esteem can be perceived in the emotional attitude of the individual to himself, while self-evaluation is a complex indicator dependent on systems of relations and reference points in personality. In everyday parlance, for denoting the entire "system" and functioning, it is more apt to use the term "self-evaluation", and for the relating to the deepest in ourselves (and for grasping the sense of *raison d'etre*) the term self-esteem.

3. **Self-evaluation means living in a condition in which the individual is from time to time able to handle the challenges of his life competently (in accord with his/her self-esteem).** In the frame of self-evaluation self-evaluation and self-esteem interact with each other, and stable self-esteem develops as a result of the

series of generalized self-evaluations. The more realistic the individual's self-evaluation is, the more stable his/her self-esteem will be, whereas unrealistic self-evaluation reduces stability. Self-evaluation is a competence that enables us to adequately confront reality. Self-esteem provides a proper attitude to this and can become a resource for adequate actions.

4. Self-esteem is connected with the deeper layers of personality.

Self-acceptance is born from the experience of being accepted in early childhood. This experience provides the stability of self-acceptance. The stability or instability of man's self-esteem becomes apparent in the longer term. Self-esteem-related injuries and deficiencies can be cured by the encounter with God, by the relationship with Him. God's healing presence, His restoring work reaches to such depths of the personality that are beyond human comprehension.

5. Contrary to the general psychological, anthropological approach, the starting point of anthropological investigations is not the man but the God-man relationship.

Understanding this is made possible through God's revelation. The general demand of our culture is therapeutic rather than religious, while people do not thirst for personal salvation, but for the feeling and momentary

illusion of personal well-being, mental health and sense of security. Consequently, a person who is socialized in a therapeutic culture is searching for a therapeutic, and not a religious answer to his/her existence, self-searching, and self-evaluation. However, the challenges of self-esteem developed and formed in this cultural context are still to be answered by God's revelation.

6. **The creative work of God is anthropocentric, and the intrinsic value of humans derives from being created.** Humans stand at the center of God's attention. In this frame of self-interpretation, which is the real context of all that is happening to humans as creatures, can they observe their life. If they are able to arrange their existence into the frame of the history of God and man, into the history of salvation, if they can connect to what God says about them, then they can stay away from two extremes. On the one hand, from searching themselves in every single verse of the Word, striving for feedback, and waiting for constant confirmation from God. Secondly, from renouncing the possibility that God can have anything to do with their life and personality. However, if connected to the biblical revelation they can find the meaning and value of their existence, so the recognition of the merits inherent in their personality will be easier.

7. **Humans are called into being by the life-affirmative love of God. This love antedates the awakening of conscience, consciousness and our own life-affirmation.** Realizing and accepting this connection roots us into God's love. From this follows a stability that is a dependence in its absolute sense (an absolute point of connection for self-esteem). Not the so-called "oceanic feeling", the conjecture from the subjective experience of the encounter with the infinite is the root of the religious dependence, but the recognition, that God is committed to human even before birth. In terms of self-esteem, this can be the source of healing and strengthening. From this follows the practice of encouragement, which is the common responsibility of parents and educators. This helps the individual to come to ongoing self-affirmation.
8. **Narcissism, which, as a result of globalization, is the basic structure of the postmodern personality, can be defined as a radical "new consciousness and as such the role of it in self-reliance is substantial.** Large global systems become more and more human-faced, consumer-centeredness assumes considerable proportions. The "revolution of needs" and the subsequently emerging hedonistic ethic has achieved that psychological discourse overshadows social discourse. The psychological discourse itself becomes a mass-ethos. God's preventative decision, life-giving

word, and love can make free from the extremes of narcissistic impulses and the necessity of filling up the needs (whether they are self-assertion, admiration of others, or drives striving for constant acclamation). The God of the Bible is not somebody who gives fulfillment to our needs automatically, but the almighty Lord who invites us to a covenant and to a relationship with Him.

- 9. In order to be rooted into God's love and to reach the following ultimate stability, one must accept the ultimate dependence on God.** The value of human existence does not depend on outstanding performance or the values defined by the current social consensus (e.g. uniqueness, social utility). Biblical anthropological insights underpin the fact that man's worth comes from God, while He considers his human creatures to be valuable without conditions. The actual norms of a society may be distorted in a variety of ways and make the value of a person dependent on different factors (performance, abilities, origin, etc.). Conversely, the biblical message of mankind is true and authoritative above cultural establishments. Moreover, the teachings of the Scripture about being human gives an accurate interpretative framework for the understanding of valuableness. Finding internal resources, integrating inner stability through self-identity, acceptance, or analytical exploration and understanding cannot provide the degree

of stability of self-esteem, that God's love and acceptance, the dependence on Him, and the attachment to Him can provide.

10. Adolescence is also unique from the perspective of religious socialization. In the period of identity consolidation, the feeling of fragmentation is a natural sign of personality formation. To this fragmentation, the gospel message can be related. During the religious socialization process, it is good if the adolescent can experience that there is a place where he can be disintegrated, express his inner tensions, and where there is room for doubts and quarrels with God. The environment of Religious Education class creates a religious socialization medium for adolescents that can enhance their self-esteem through the mediation, the public discussion and the understanding of the biblical concepts reinforced by the awareness of the biblical anthropological view, by the testimony about God's love, by the loving community, and by the acceptance experienced from the side of the teacher.

11. The stability of self-esteem strengthens self-integrity and helps adaptation. Although young people seek to strengthen their own self-ideal through their own religious practices because of their narcissistic drives, a person with balanced self-evaluation realizes that during the religious socialization process he/she has the opportunity to establish a relationship in which he/she can

experience an affirmative, supportive and positive attitude from the side of a "trans-social significant Other". The encounter between religious demand and the need for self-evaluation is given to the human in the religious experience. Religious joy, thanksgiving, and prayer are modes of connections with God. Religion can be a trans-social resource for self-evaluation, which remains even if the appreciation deriving from the human environment is not constant.

12. The community of the church is the place where self-evaluation and self-esteem can be healed and empowered. Religious education points to this direction too. In the Old Testament, and in the Book of Psalms in particular, the identity of man acted out in the community assembled to worship God appears also at the level of everyday matters and determines everyday life. This is recognizable in the New Testament community of worship as well. For the sake of self-esteem, it is especially important for the self to interpret his/her existence within a community. The community of worship can be a decisive primary reference medium even if the members of the congregation differ in the aptness of their self-evaluation and in the stability of their self-esteem. The community of believers is the community of mutual acceptance and appreciation, where the background of its members does not count, while everyone is of equal worth and equally acceptable. In this way, the members of the community can grow together. Long-term

healing and restoration goes beyond the religious pedagogical framework and requires the healing medium of the church community.

- 13. If the place of long-term healing is the community of the church, the primary task of religious education is encouragement.** The educator, the teacher can not take over the role of the parent, although the significance of their task is similar, so the educator's evaluation cannot be detached from the biblical picture of and the warnings about parents. The responsibility of parents and educators for the development of self-esteem and self-evaluation is not only psychologically affirmed but also plays an important role in the biblical system of values. Paul warns the fathers in his teaching of the Christian family: "You, fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged." (Col 3:21 NKJV) The child who becomes shy and faint-hearted due to the rugged, strict parental upbringing will be less successful in finding courage in challenges waiting for him/her in life, than others. The task of parents and educators who engage with children is encouragement. This is in accord with the need to set boundaries for the child. All this is to be realized in the community of obedience and love, in mutual interdependence and affiliation in the new life of Christ.

14. From a religious-pedagogical point of view, it is important first to notice the students who are heavily deficient in their self-esteem and are in need of support, and secondly to render them the healing power of the gospel. For such a person it is not enough to give feedbacks or affirmations based on objective, realistic/rational arguments, as they tend to attribute their results to fortunate coincidence or the merits of others. With the aid of God's positive evaluating messages, the indirect experience of appreciation, aptitude, and recognition can be conveyed to them. God's choice and grace do not depend on man's merit, ability, or performance. God, raising and restoring man, restores his self-esteem too (1 Cor 1: 25; 1 Cor 4: 3-4; Jn 17:17).

15. The result of the presentation of the four concepts of religious education that assist in the development of self-esteem and self-esteem is as follows:

a. **The significance of the liberal pedagogical approach concerning self-evaluation and self-esteem lies in the religious experience and in the strengthening of the students self-consciousness.** The internal powers, integrity and the feeling of worth are values to be developed and supported within the students. But the achievement of integrity and consciousness cannot be the sole aim of man's development, because on the

one hand this comes from a modernist, hierarchical and evolutionary understanding of the human (man becomes more advanced in his life path), and, on the other hand, it lacks the self-resigning "motive", namely, leaving one's self behind for Christ (see Mt 16:25). Man's self-consciousness can be at most only one step towards the road to the balanced functioning of self-evaluation. The concept emphasizes the consideration of the students' feelings, which is all-important. Emphasizing the religious experience and the importance of feelings helps to make religion more perceptible, and through the experience and feelings, it reinforces the connection with the religious community as well. The religious experience, however, is not the basis of the relationship with God, but the gospel that Jesus Christ brought to man (using the term of the liberal concept) about man's self-worth.

- b. **From the therapeutic concept, we can learn the importance of keeping the balance between information and interaction in the Bible class. The therapeutic focus is a part of the curriculum to help the longer-term socialization processes that are conducive to self-esteem.** An important element of the concept is the consideration of the student's life situation. In group work, for young people, it becomes possible to re-experience their own situation and their difficulties and to

accommodate themselves to others. Self-esteem is strengthened through the success and fulfillment achieved during the actions. In addition, feedback from the environment (contemporary groups, adults) will be decisive. The most positive impulse to self-esteem is the student's experience of self-worthiness and solidarity with the other.

- c. **In the symbolic-didactic approach, the use of symbols gains much weight in cases, when such content is transmitted that cannot be expressed by words. The identity development of students is fostered by the occupation with symbols, and the communally performed rite heals.** In the process of becoming an individual, due to the plurality of the self-interpreting meaning patterns, we have to count with a fragmented identity. The man searches for his missing pieces throughout his whole life. The identity of the individual needs a variety of symbolic stories, which – in the frame of Bible class – can reach back to the experiences of young people and to their reality. Symbols, on the edges of objective and subjective elements of reality, provide an opportunity for the objective truth about God's love and acceptance to reach the student's subjective world through symbolic expression. In the world of the student, who is coming from the secularized environment, and the world of the Bible class, the symbols can bridge, as their strength consists of

compression and simplification. Their weaknesses are the same: they are ordinary, and they can be interpreted and misunderstood in many ways. Indirectly, their orienting, integrating, conflict-processing function can help in the long-term development of self-evaluation.

- d. **Constructivist pedagogy of religion places the individual method of learning, the inner methods of creation to the center of attention.** From a constructivist viewpoint, in religious education, students themselves have to reach the internal truths acceptable to them, as these truths can only be revealed as internal and individual constructs. For the individual, every human word or testimony about God is under a cloud, with no absolute validity. The demand of constructivist religious-pedagogy is that God should "present Himself" to everyone, the Holy Ghost should one by one justify the validity of the truth, the reality and the knowledge of God for everyone. It is true, however, that God can help the inner process of self-construction because He is truly a determining reality. He will override the man's thoughts on him, his inner reality reconstruction. In the encounter of constructivism and theology, the most exciting question is how a community-accepted reality can become a reality acceptable to the individual. It is necessary to help general theological truths to be understood and accepted in a

way that the learner relates to them along with his/her own constructions. During the conceptual shift, the internal cognitive structure changes dramatically. For the development of self-esteem, it is crucial that the student can experience real conceptual changes so that he can learn a new truth. During the constructive learning process, in the accepting atmosphere, there are more opportunities for self-validation through the acceptance of emotions. Its role in assisting the development of realistic self-evaluation is that it supports the student's self-reflection capacity and inspires him/her to figure his/her own development, creating such a medium in Bible class in which the pupil can get feedback on his/her own inner designs.

For pedagogy of religion, the self-evaluation and self-esteem of students is an inevitable topic. Its significance consists not only of what the teacher says when it comes thematically to the question of man's worth, but it is filtered through the pastor's and religious teacher's attitude toward young people, and through their testimony when addressing biblical-anthropological questions. It appears in the choice of classroom methods, or in taking into account the students' personal needs. It is also present in the preaching and teaching of the church where we invite the Bible Class students together with their families.

The point where the self-esteem of the teacher and that of the student meets, the connection between students from a different background, and what connects the class to the congregation from the perspective of self-esteem, is the accepting of the love of Christ, the desire and need for a deeper engrossment. The letter to the Ephesians, chosen as the motto of this work, catches the very essence of the meaning of true, inner stability. The motif of grounding in Christ is shown with the divine intention of God to empower the inner man in the believers:

„For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height— to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3: 14-21)

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