

1 Performative Religious Didactics 2.0

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1.1 Theses

1. The credo of all performative approaches in religious didactics is: One must experience religion in order to understand religion in all its dimensions. Purely discursive learning is not sufficient to become religiously competent; this thesis can be substantiated sociologically (in terms of the contextual framework of the learning subject), theologically (in terms of the subject matter) and in terms of learning theory (with regard to the claim of sustainable learning).
2. Models of competence orientation present a particular challenge for Religious Education (RE) because it is controversial to what extent pupils may be instructed in religious expression (expressive competence) and in participation in religious practices (participatory competence). This seems legitimate only if the teachers design performative teaching and learning processes in such a way that the respective speech acts are not perceived as intrusive.
3. Different models of the performative have been developed in both Protestant and Catholic Religious Pedagogy, which differ significantly in their hermeneutics and practical application. In view of the critical objections, it seems essential to develop a concept of the performative that safeguards freedom in religious education and intertwines the levels of discourse, experience and reflection, thus enabling participants to assign subjective meaning.
4. The critical objections to a performative concept refer to the peculiarities and limitations of the school system, the autonomy of the learners' beliefs and the dignity of religious practices. They highlight the failures of unsuccessful performative projects. Furthermore, it is questionable and contested how broadly or narrowly the concept of the performative should be understood, which ultimately represents an attempt to encompass very different tendencies in religious didactics: From a broad understanding, action-orientated forms of Religious Education (RE) are also included, while a narrow understanding focuses primarily on those in which the practice of lived religion directly or in transformed form finds its way into Religious Education.
5. In the discourse on the opportunities and limitations of performative forms of learning, a divergence between practical and theoretical Religious Pedagogy becomes apparent: While academic Religious Pedagogy tends to point out systemic and subject-related limitations, many teachers of religion at schools have little understanding of the objections raised and emphasise the need to promote pupils' expressive and participatory skills.

1.2 Perspectives

1.2.1 Experiencing Religion in Order to Understand Religion

“In which Catholic Religious Education (RE) will topics such as Mary, pilgrimages and sacramentals still play a major role?—If they do, it is likely due to regional factors, but overall a marginalisation of such topics can be observed”¹ (Schmidt-Kortenbusch, 2011, p. 159). Martin Schmidt-Kortenbusch is mistaken. For more than 20 years, both Catholic and Protestant Religious Education have been reflecting on how the lived practice of religion can not only be presented in the classroom, but also responsibly incorporated into the teaching process. A look into the real-world practice of Religious Education shows that lived religion in all its possible forms and variations (forms of prayer, blessing rituals, pilgrimage projects, meditative elements, etc.), is practised not only in primary schools and not only in southern Germany, but also in higher grades and across all regions. The fundamental belief of all performative approaches in religious didactics is: One must experience religion in order to understand religion. Exclusively discursive learning is not sufficient to develop religious competency. This thesis can be justified sociologically (in terms of the contextual framework of the learning subject), theologically (in terms of the subject matter) and in terms of learning theory (with regard to the claim of sustainable learning) (Mendl, 2021, p. 240).

Sociological: Today, only a minority of children and young people are religiously socialised. The break with tradition means that many manifestations (rites, prayers, liturgical forms, places of social and diaconal work) and elements of knowledge (festivals in the church year and their significance, central beliefs and prayer texts, biblical and church historical knowledge) are unfamiliar to children and young people. In order to understand the fields of a culturally shaped religion in their practical execution it is not sufficient to look at them from a distance. If the purpose of education in state schools is not only to enable an interpretation of the world, but also to offer a way of engaging with it (Benner, 2004, p. 15), the question arises as to how an expansion of experience can take place in the classroom itself, which then serves as the foundation for a deeper understanding. “The aim here is consistently to offer today's pupils their own religious experiences through the active appropriation and transformation of predetermined religious forms of expression (especially from the Judeo-Christian tradition)”² (Englert, 2002, p. 32). At the same time, this line of argument repeatedly leads to the assumption that a performative approach is designed to compensate for primary religious experiences that no longer exist. Such an objective

1 “In welchem katholischen Religionsunterricht werden die Themen Maria, Wallfahrten und Sakramentalien noch eine große Rolle spielen?—Wenn ja, hat das sicher auch regionale Ursachen, aber insgesamt lässt sich doch eine Marginalisierung solcher Themen feststellen”.

2 “Es geht hier durchgängig darum, heutigen Schüler:innen in der tätigen Aneignung und Transformation vorgegebener religiöser Ausdrucksgestalten (insbesondere aus der jüdisch-christlichen Tradition) eigene religiöse Erfahrungen zu eröffnen”.

would in fact be inappropriate, but it is not the aim at all: The aim of performative approaches is not to compensate, but to understand religion.

Theological: Religion is more than just knowledge of faith moulded into formulas. It is characterised by forms of social and communal practice. Anyone who wants to understand the form-bound peculiarity of revealed religion and the associated religious practice is dependent on a “scenic and gestural, bodily and spatial representation”³ (Klie & Leonhard, 2003, p. 14); they must “taste and feel”⁴ religion (Mendl 2019b). A purely demonstrative teaching method is not sufficient; religion reveals itself “in form” (ibid., p. 147), and this form cannot only be observed from the outside, it must also be experienced in an appropriate way. This goes far beyond the ritual-liturgical realm: The ethics and social structure of Christianity can be understood in a deeper way if one has experienced the social-charitable activities on site; one can better fathom the distinctive way of life of people who come together to form religious groups if one spends some time with them; the aura of a Romanesque or Gothic church interior as well as of a mosque or synagogue can best be experienced and understood through the real exposure to the space. And, of course, this also applies to the particularly controversial field of ritual and liturgical practices: “Taizé is a phenomenon that cannot really be put into words, you have to experience it”⁵ (Mendl & Schiefer Ferrari, 2006, p. 92), at least in the form of a Taizé prayer; a blessing needs to be felt, the multidimensional dialogue structure of a psalm prayer experienced, a pilgrimage walked. As will be discussed below, it is necessary to explore when adopting a participant’s perspective (“in religion”) and when adopting an observer’s perspective (“from” or “about religion”) is appropriate.

Learning theory: Sustainable learning succeeds when different learning domains are intelligently interlinked. The aim is to avoid purely inert knowledge. Understanding and retention are enhanced when implicit and declarative knowledge elements are didactically linked. This also means that the aim is not to replace discursive learning, but to create a well-founded learning setting in which different forms of learning are combined. A struggle for the significance of action-orientated and body-related performative forms of learning also proves to be compatible with the “performative turn” in the cultural sciences, humanities and educational science (Wulf & Zirfaß, 2007). For example, cognitive insights into the gift of life and active participation in the creation of a Thanksgiving altar and a small communal celebration can provide a deeper understanding of this festival within the church year (Mendl, 2022, pp. 158–167).

3 “szenische und gestische, leibliche und räumliche Darstellung”.

4 “kosten und fühlen”.

5 “Taizé ist ein Phänomen, das nicht wirklich in Worte zu fassen ist, man muss es erleben”.

1.2.2 Expressive and Participatory Competence

The models of competence orientation for Religious Education (RE) have broadened the view of the tasks of an educational process in religion beyond religious content and the acquisition of knowledge (conceptual competence): Religious learning is rather closely linked to the other fundamental modes of human understanding of the world and also encompasses religious sensitivity (perceptual competence), discernment (judgement competence) and the ability to engage in religious communication (dialogue competence). Above all, the competence fields of religious expressive behaviour (expressive competence) and a religiously motivated way of life (participation competence) affect the field of the performative. They should be regarded as sensitive in that they touch on the area of autonomy of faith, which will be discussed below. It is no coincidence that a Protestant competence model states: “justified (non-) participation in religious and social practice”⁶ (Fischer & Elsenbast, 2006, p. 17). To what extent is it necessary to penetrate the practices of a religious expression or a common religious practice in order to be able to make a reasoned decision in favour of or against a particular way of life? Is it sufficient to theoretically discuss the relevant topics of verbal expression and participation in religious practice in order to then make a decision, or is adequate participation required to develop a sense of appreciation or dislike before deciding?

It becomes clear that the areas of participatory and expressive competence can only be responsibly addressed if teachers possess a reflective understanding of how to design performative teaching and learning processes.

1.2.3 Concepts of the Performative

In Protestant and Catholic Religious Pedagogy, different models of the performative have been developed, which differ significantly in their hermeneutics and their practical development.

The first models of a performative approach were developed by *Protestant religious educators* (for more detailed information on the history of performative, see Dinger, 2018; Dremel, 2017; Dressler, 2016; Hilpert, 2020, 101–173; Klie & Leonhard, 2003 and Leonhard, 2008; Leonhard & Klie, 2012; Mendl, 2016, 2017, 2019a, 2021). They endeavour to manage the tension between the specific systemic framework conditions of the school as a place of action and the outlined need to make religion tangible: How can one present “religion as a peculiar culture of symbolic communication”⁷ (Dressler, 2002, p. 11) in such a way that it becomes recognisable in its liturgical and narrative forms, how can one “stage it bodily and spatially”⁸ (Leonhard & Klie, 2003, p. 7) without crossing systemic boundaries? One would like to avoid any impression that

6 “begründete (Nicht-)Teilhabe an religiöser und gesellschaftlicher Praxis”.

7 “Religion als eine eigenartige Kultur symbolischer Kommunikation”.

8 “Leiblich und räumlich in Szene”.

performative actions are authentic religious speech acts, because such acts would not align with the modalities of learning within the school system. The term “staging” therefore indicates a boundary that describes the framework of what is possible within the school context: Staging is about a “trial action in religious worlds”⁹ (Dressler, 2002, p. 14). The concept of staging is deliberately used to create a proximity to play and theatre dramaturgy: Participants take on roles, fully aware of the artificiality of the play, without questioning its seriousness. The staging metaphor harbours another boundary: after the “as-if” action, the play concludes. Religious acts and, above all, acts of worship could certainly be described as a sacred play; the elements of such a dramatic and formal “large-scale text of worship as a composition of prose and poetry”¹⁰ (Husmann & Klie, 2005, p. 18) could be approached in an active and physically orientated way in the classroom. It must always be made clear to the pupils “that it is ‘only’ a matter of trying out speech acts, but not of personal (non-)belief”¹¹ (ibid., p. 124), for instance, when they exchange mutual blessings (for a critical review of related teaching plans, see Dressler, Klie & Kumlehn, 2012). With reference back to speech act theory, a distinction is made here between performativity and performance; pupils should be enabled to distinguish between a genuine speech act (performativity) and its use in the classroom setting (performance) (Roose, 2006).

The first *Catholic variant* of the performative can be found in the German bishops’ 2005 article “Religious Education (RE) Facing New Challenges” (Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 2005). In terms of argumentation, the discussions are influenced by the Protestant preliminary work, but in some aspects they go beyond it and employ their own hermeneutics. The starting point is the break with tradition outlined at the beginning. In addition to conveying a knowledge of faith, Religious Education must therefore also “familiarise pupils with forms of lived faith and enable them to have their own experiences with faith and the church”¹² (ibid., p. 24). In contrast to the Protestant concepts, the bishops assume a participant perspective for pupils in Catholic Religious Education, whose legitimacy is grounded in baptism. In order to understand their own religion, they also need a connection to religiously and ecclesiastically shaped experiences with forms of expression of a religion institutionalised by the Church. The statement that Religious Education must familiarise pupils with forms of lived faith subsequently triggered much suspicion and criticism (cf. Mendl, 2016, pp. 20–24)! If an initial assessment of the various performative approaches distinguishes between a Protestant approach, which is said to be more transformative, and a Catholic approach, which is described as compensatory (Englert, 2008: pp. 7–8; for a critical view, see Dremel, 2017, pp. 73–74; Mendl, 2016,

9 “Probehandeln in religiösen Welten”.

10 “Groß-Textes Gottesdienst als Komposition aus Prosa und Lyrik”.

11 “Dass es sich ‘nur’ um das Probieren von Sprechakten handelt, nicht aber um den persönlichen (Nicht-)Glauben”.

12 “mit Formen gelebten Glaubens bekannt machen und eigene Erfahrungen mit Glaube und Kirche ermöglichen”.

pp. 22–23), this applies in part to the argumentation in the bishops' article, but not to further drafts.

Mirjam Schambeck certainly sees the opportunity that performative Religious Education could open up a space for reflection and experience for the Christian faith and describes the model of mystagogical learning she has developed as “a concretion of performative learning” (Schambeck 2007, p. 72). However, mystagogical moments could only be incorporated into lessons; a mystagogical performance must remain open to the “permanently unavailable, from which faith learning draws”¹³ (Grümme, 2016, p. 173). This simultaneous purposefulness and openness provide a guideline that can be concretised didactically in the following sections.

At the same time as the bishops' article was published, but argumentatively independent and also in contrast to the Protestant-influenced staging mode, I presented my approach of the performative (Mendl, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022).

Performative forms of teaching are fundamentally characterised by invitation and voluntary participation (Mendl, 2017, pp. 88–413). The invitation to participate in religious practices must also be characterised by the possibility of assigning a subjective meaning to the experience. Pupils can decide for themselves whether they want to take on the role of participant or remain at an observer level—and there are many other shades of meaning in between! This subjective assignment of meaning in the performance of a religious act is justified with reference to speech act theory (Mendl, 2017, pp. 42–43) and must also be understood against the background of a fundamental constructivist understanding of learning (Sander, 2011). John Austin calls what someone does by saying something an illocutionary act—the context and intention of the speaker are decisive in how they imagine the successful speech act. What the utterance actually achieves is called a perlocutionary speech act; the actual effect is beyond the speaker's control (Austin, 1972, pp. 122–136). An example from everyday life: I want to tell a joke, but it is received quite differently by my conversation partners. Translated to Religious Education: An action performed together can be individually filled with meaning and interpreted in very different ways; the (illocutionary) intention of the teacher does not have to be identical to the factual (perlocutionary) effect on the pupils and their interpretation. An example: If one describes the illocutionary act of a prayer, as the speaker intends it to be ideally successful, it consists of the trusting, praising, lamenting, etc. turn of the person who prays towards a transcendent counterpart, of whose existence they are convinced. In a learning group, however, various pupils are gathered together and attribute very different meanings to their actions during the speech act of “praying”: one takes on the role of participant, another doubts the existence of the addressee, the third remains in detached observation or does not participate at all, while the fourth thinks about the next lesson. The decision as to whether a speech act is “authentic”, whether it is a playful experiment or a “real” performance, is left to the autonomous decision of the learning subject in this model. However, this possibility of differentiated behaviour

13 Das “bleibend Unverfügbare, von dem das Glaubenlernen zehrt”.

with a performative setting and an individual assignment of meaning must then also be prepared and developed in a didactically transparent manner.

1.2.4 Critical Objections

Significant and serious objections and enquiries have been formulated against the outlined approaches to the performative (cf. Mendl, 2016 for a detailed documentation and discussion of critical essays; see also Gärtner, 2017; Käbisch, 2014; Kliemann, 2014). They relate primarily to the fields of the performative which are concerned with acts of confession, i.e. prayer, liturgy and rites of blessing, rather than with action-, experience- and body-oriented learning in the context of biblical, historical or ethical education. The criticism is made from different perspectives—systemically, from the logic of schooling, from the value of an individual's autonomy of faith and from the dignity of religious speech acts.

School system: The artificial nature of education at state schools must be accepted as a *moratorium on the seriousness of life*; life can only be reflected here in a didactically mediated way. Therefore, it constitutes a *category error* if authentic religious practice were to be performed in school (Mendl, 2017, p. 61f.). Critics fear a re-catechisation of Religious Education if religion were to be practised at school.

Religious autonomy of learners: In the formal subject of Religious Education, which is not only attended by pupils of faith, everyone must be guaranteed freedom of confession (Porzelt, 2016, p. 191); no one may be forced to perform religious acts against their will. It cannot be assumed that all learners share the understanding of prayer outlined above as a devotion to a transcendent entity. Since the core of individuals is beyond external control, this argues in favour of a “prohibition of overpowering”¹⁴ in the performance of religious rituals in the classroom (Heumann, 2016, p. 112).—This is an argument that is repeatedly criticised in relation to observable practices in primary schools.

Dignity of religious acts: If religious acts, which have their original place in the congregation and family, are practised in a playful and transformative way in the classroom, this could jeopardise the seriousness and dignity of these forms of religious expression (Porzelt 2016, p. 192; Meurer, in Mendl, 2016, p. 142). This criticism then also relates to the limitations of a performative approach to the rituals of other religions (e.g. celebration of Passover, prayer postures in Islam).

14 “Überwältigungsverbot”.

1.3 Practice

1.3.1 The Basic Model: Discourse—Experience—Reflection

In order to take the outlined objections seriously and, above all, to ensure the learners’ autonomy of faith, a didactic framework seems indispensable that combines elements of experiential learning with cognitive anchoring (linking to a curriculum topic and transparent preparation for the experiential dimension) and especially reflection. Pupils must be informed about the nature of the action planned and how they can engage with it. They should also be encouraged to reflect on their experience, allowing them to develop their own interpretations and experiences. A formal planning model was created on the basis of these considerations (Mendl, 2016, pp. 219–221). It should be understood as an ideal type rather than as a rigid model; there are didactic scenarios in which a discursive introduction is intentionally omitted, and there does not always have to be an immediate self-reflexive evaluation. The central point is that under the auspices of learning at school, every form of experiencing religion must be embedded in a framework of discourse and reflection. The aim of performative learning is the understanding of religious actions, contexts and events, not compensation and not familiarisation, and certainly not a return to catechetical instruction. In the context of the classroom and Religious Education, access to elements of a lived religion will always take place in a creative and transformative way, as the corresponding practical projects also show.

Performative arrangement

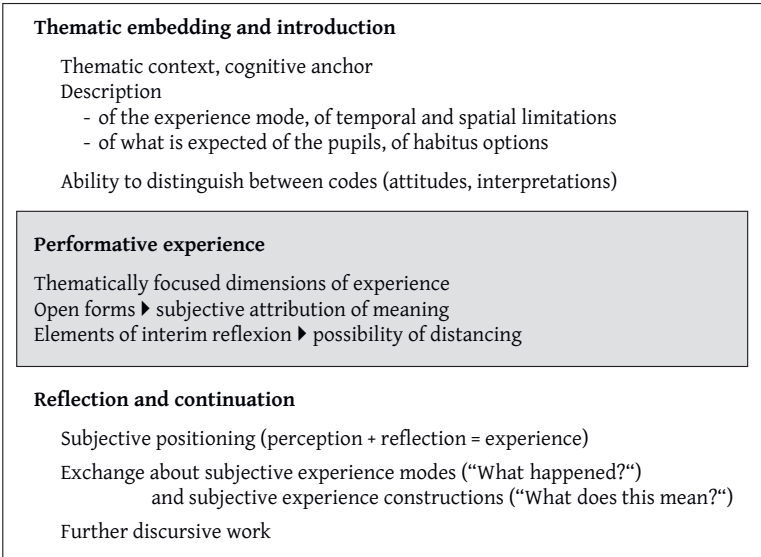


Figure 1.1: Performative arrangement (based on Mendl, 2016, p. 220).

An empirical review of the implementation of this model, which shapes the development of a performative practice as a criteriological element, can be carried out on the basis of specific existing practice designs (e.g. *Notizblock*, 2011; *Mitteilungen RU*, 2013; see also Mendl, 2016, pp. 217–224). Carefully considered practical examples for the particularly controversial field of ritual and liturgical performances can be critically examined in the two practical volumes on performative Religious Education for primary schools (Mendl, 2022) and secondary schools (Mendl, 2024); the following practical examples refer to these publications.

1.3.2 Praying, Celebrating and Blessing

According to Christian Grethlein, “praying” and “being blessed” are the two “elementary and everyday forms of practising the Christian religion” (Grethlein, 2005, p. 186). However, it is precisely the religious practices which encourage pupils to “celebrate God and life” (Mendl, 2017, pp. 161–250) that ignite the outlined dispute over the necessity or danger of a performative model.

For example, the question of starting a lesson with a prayer of some kind is already controversial (Kenngott & Kuld, 2012, pp. 149–150; Mendl, 2016, pp. 226–228; Mendl & Peters, 2020, p. 2): May Religious Education, like any other subject (e.g. sport: warm-up, music: vocal warm-up, Latin: testing vocabulary, mathematics: solving mathematical problems in front of the class), begin with an opening impulse that signals which mode of engaging with the world will be addressed next? Beyond this focus on the beginning of the lesson, the following discussion is concerned with projects where religious practices are carried out within the lesson itself.

The available practical projects (especially in Mendl, 2022) show that the basic model outlined appears to be quite feasible: The explanation of the so-called “small” sign of the cross is combined with corresponding practical prayer exercises; the children can carry out individual prayer exercises as part of a learning circle on the subject of prayer (*Notizblock*, 2011, pp. 19–21); the exploration of the meaning of the “pearls of faith” is combined with meditative phases in which prayer texts and psalm verses are also introduced.

The sensitivity for the varying degrees to which children and young people should engage in explicit forms of confession is evident in instructions that are characterised by the aspects of openness and the safeguarding of freedom: The application of grains of incense as part of a Bible garden excursion can be done in silence, accompanied by a general expression of gratitude or by giving thanks to God; during a “Spiriwalk” (a walk with accompanying spiritual elements) to a mountain peak, pupils express their sense of wonder generally or as a praise of Creation addressed to the Creator. The expression of gratitude in the context of a Thanksgiving project can also be addressed specifically to God or left generally open.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable renaissance of blessing rites, which has also been reflected in relevant didactic literature (*Katechetische Blätter*, 2016; *Reli+plus*, 2014; 2015; Husmann & Klie, 2005, pp. 114–127). The topic often arises in the context of biblical blessing narratives or in connection with the sacraments and sacramen-

tals. Two examples: After a process of reflection on the meaning and act of blessing, the children are invited to a blessing ceremony during which they can either offer kind words to one another or give blessings; it is also accepted if some children choose not to take part. They can still contribute to the subsequent reflection from their observer role (Mendl, 2022, pp. 114–115). An anointment with scented oil in the context of exploring baptismal symbols remains ambiguous, oscillating between a loving physical gesture and an explicit act of blessing, which is also illustrated by the children's responses (Mendl, 2022, pp. 224–225).

A respectful approach to different pupil attitudes can be observed even when the learning groups are formally quite homogeneous and consist of children from the same denomination, and not only when the heterogeneity is increased by the participation of children from other denominations, from other religions or with no religious affiliation.

Overall, it is noticeable that the pupils are very open to performative practices and show a strong willingness to engage in meditative, spiritual or religious activities.

1.3.3 Embodied Learning

There is also a debate about how broadly or narrowly the concept of the performative should be understood, as it ultimately represents an attempt to encompass very different tendencies in religious didactics: From a broad perspective, action-oriented forms of Religious Education also come into focus, aiming to capture the aesthetic depth dimension of the religious, from a narrow perspective primarily those in which the practices of lived religion, for example “liturgical pieces”, “sacraments” or “rites of passage” (Husman & Klie, 2005, p. 5) are either directly or in transformed form incorporated in Religious Education.

Thus, contributions published under the label of the performative also include didactic examples from areas such as body work with biblical texts or the sensual experience of church spaces. Central to these are elements of an embodied learning culture and person-centred learning processes (Leonhard, 2006, pp. 208–236) and various ways of religious education that correspond to a physical symbolisation (ibid., p. 237), but also extend beyond Religious Education, for example, to the development of a performative religious didactics of dance as a performative scope of possibilities (*Tanz im Dazwischen*, Hilpert, 2020).

1.3.4 Shaping Relationships

The basic model of a performative arrangement outlined above also appears to be suitable for interpersonal learning processes, especially those that take place in an inter-religious context. The aim here should not be to perform the rites of other religions, but to experience individuals who belong to a different faith (Kalbheim, 2021, p. 274; Mendl, 2017, pp. 74–76) and to gain insights into other religions through a mode of “staged participation” (Fingerhut, 2022, pp. 305–314; pp. 404–408): “Performative ex-