13 Strangeness in inter-religious classroom communication

Research on the *Gift-to-the-Child* material

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The new, the unheard-of, the strange are stimuli for learning. There is no learning without response to experiences of strangeness. We thus have strong reason to focus attention on strangeness and its association with religion. We need, however, to distinguish here between the strangeness of a new and unheard-of aspect of the religion with which the child has some familiarity; and the strangeness of the symbols, practices or beliefs of a religion which is foreign to the child's experience. While the former rather concerns the learning process in religious education, which concentrates on the one tradition or denomination of the pupils, the latter is especially an issue in inter-religious education. Exploring the world of 'strange' religions involves more and rather 'pure' experiences of strangeness since there is no immediate and obvious relation to the child's previous experience and imagination. It is thus of special interest when analyzing and conceptualizing inter-religious learning that we pay attention to the ways in which pupils develop and deal with strangeness when they encounter an unknown aspect of religion.

We can deal with this question theoretically (and prescriptively) and engage in reflections about strangeness in religion(s), religious development and religious education; and we can take a closer look into the classroom and try to understand the reaction of the pupils (descriptively). This article does both: in the second section, it presents results from empirical classroom research in Germany focusing on the question of familiarity and strangeness. In the first section, theoretical considerations of strangeness provide the starting point for developmental and educational perspectives.

Section 1: theoretical perspectives on strangeness and religion

There is a plentitude of experiences – and they may have increased in present-day multi-cultural and multi-religious society – which we cannot integrate: experiences of the strange, of strange persons, strange habits, strange religious symbols which we cannot easily understand and which may even resist assimilation. They are unexpected and they do not fit. It may

even not only be difficult or impossible to assimilate such experiences of strangeness; there may be reason to refrain from and prevent such assimilation of the strange.

Strangeness as challenge and demand, strangeness as gift

Philosophical reflection on strangeness warns against the assimilation and reduction of strangeness into a framework of one's own. The strange, to refer to Bernhard Waldenfels (1990, 1997a, 1997b), is a challenge, a 'goad' [*Stachel*], which does not conform to and confirm one's own identity, but triggers new insights and thus offers a surplus.

> The strange ... brings itself to attention as surplus which precedes and exceeds every observation and treatment of the strange. Not only the reduction of the strange to one's own, but also the attempt of a synthesis between the two belongs to the violent acts which silence the demand of the strange.
>
> (Waldenfels 1999: 50, own translation)

The act of assimilating the strange is a violent act. In general agreement with Waldenfels, Yoshiro Nakamura (2000), in his study on *Xenosophy*, calls this assimilation of the strange *exoticism*, which he defines as 'replacement of the experienced strange with an orchestrated strange ['inszeniertes Fremdes'], replacement of strangeness with otherness' (Nakamura 2000: 72). This exposure and critique of such violent assimilation and reduction of strangeness opens a critical perspective on programmes such as Theo Sunder-meier's (1996) which aim at an 'understanding of the strange' at the cost of the encounter with the 'unexpected strange'; it also allows for a clarifying re-interpretation and appraisal of Ortfried Schäfter's (1991) fourth modus of 'complementarity' which he correctly juxtaposes against the modi of under-standing the strange as 'counter-image' to, as 'resonance corpus', or as 'enrichment' of one's own. Schäfter's fourth modus – as border experience – is intended to keep the possibility open for the experience of the unexpected strange which cannot be integrated and assimilated. In this radical or neo-phenomenological philosophical perspective, a conceptualization of the strange is suggested which we must explicate in terms of learning and devel-opment: the experience of the strange as a challenging, curiosity-eliciting and demanding resistance or obstacle.

If the experience of unexpected strangeness is a challenge and demand, and, by the same token, a gift which should not be destroyed by the violent act of assimilation and integration, a development of John Hull's talk about religion as 'a gift to the child' seems likely. Experiences of strangeness not only belong to the encounter with religion (of every provenance) from the very beginning of this encounter, but the unexpected experience of the strange needs to be preserved and protected against the collapse into

assimilation. In my view, the *Gift-to-the-Child* material promises to manage such processes. Will it stand the test in the classroom? Before I go into greater detail, I should like to draw some implications of this phenomenological approach to strangeness for a perspective on learning, on inter-religious learning, and on development.

Styles of strangeness – a developmental perspective

From the philosophical perspective as outlined above, strangeness may appear as monolithic. On closer scrutiny, however, it becomes obvious that there are several varieties of strangeness. Strangeness can be coupled with anxiety or fear, with the desire to assimilate and abandon strangeness, with the attempt to grasp and understand it, with reflection, or with curiosity and an openness to its challenge, opposition and demand. Thus, strangeness occurs in a variety of styles. Figure 13.1 presents an account of the varieties of strangeness – with a clear developmental direction toward the more advanced style of dealing with the strange. This variety of styles of strangeness is embedded, on the one hand, in Robert Selman's (1980) framework of perspective taking and its further advancement into interpersonal negotiation styles (Selman and Schultz 1988) and, on the other hand, in the framework of inter-religious negotiation styles (Streib 2001b) which correspond to the religious styles (Streib 2001a).

The column 'Versions of Strangeness' lists variations which range from xenophobic anxiety and xeno-polemic fear, to convention-based dissonance and reflective understanding of the strange as the other (reducing strangeness to otherness) – both are forms of exoticism – and to the experience of the strange as challenging, curiosity-eliciting and demanding resistance.

This scale, of course, is derived from developmental theory; but, as I have made it clear for religious development (Streib 1997, 2001a, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c), I have come to question assumptions of a linear, unidirectional and unidimensional developmental progress through structural-holistic stages. Nevertheless, I claim that there is a hierarchical order of these styles: the styles of strangeness describe a movement of declining anxiety and increasing curiosity, a movement of increasing tolerance and appreciation of strangeness. This movement also describes a learning process: 'cultivating strangeness' could be the brief formula for the direction of this process. For the learning process with respect to the strange, this means developing and nurturing the ability to tolerate experiences of perplexity, it means strengthening frustration tolerance toward non-understanding – developing a non-hermeneutic, to refer to Nakamura (2000) – respecting the challenging and demanding resistance of the strange, and giving curiosity and openness for the surplus of the strange an increasingly greater chance.

Depth Psychological or Societal-Symbolic Coordination of Social Perspectives (CSP)	Actor Choice in Inter-Religious Negotiation	Inter-Religious Negotiation Styles	Varieties of Strangeness	Versions of Familiarity	Religious Style
Depth Psychological or Societal-Symbolic Coordination of Social Perspectives (CSP)	**Dialog** as appreciation of the other as a gift, as openness for self-critique and learning through the encounter with the other / the foreign	**Dialogical / Inter-Religious** (perspective change, accounting for the 'surplus' of the strange)	**Resistance / Demand** Strangeness as challenging, curiosity-eliciting and demanding resistance which offers a 'surplus'	**Selfhood** Familiarity as sense of oneself (one's own) as another	Dialogical
	Individuative Communication recognizing – with attention to emotions – inter-religious interdependence, but with preoccupation for guarding one's own intimacy and autonomy	**Reflective & Explicit / Multi-Religious** (pluralistic or identifying common ground)	**Otherness** Strangeness as reflective assimilation of the religion of the other	**Identity** Familiarity as (partial) conformity or identity of the other religion with one's own	Individuative Systemic
Mutual / Third Person CSP	**Collaboration** with the other based on mutual interest in cross-religious consent and harmony	**Mutual & Implicit / Multi-Religious** (harmonizing or ignorant)	**Dissonance** Convention-based, implicit sense of strangeness toward the other religion; or ignoring the other by demarcation	**Resonance** Familiarity as resonance with the religion of the other; strong identification with one's own group	Mutual
Reciprocal / Self-reflective CSP	**Reciprocal interaction** in the service of the self's religious perspective	**Reciprocal-Imperial / Mono-Religious** (inclusive or exclusive)	**Xeno-Polemic Fear** Dominance of strangeness as xeno-polemic attitude toward the other religion	**Egocentric Suppression of Alternatives** Egocentric familiarity with one's own religion	Instrumental Reciprocal
Subjective / Unilateral / One-Way CSP	**One Way Directives** or requests to consent to one's own religion	**Egocentric or Xenophobic / Mono-Religious**	**Xenophobic Anxiety** Strangeness as xenophobic attitude toward the other religion	**Egocentric Lack of Alternatives** 'Blind' egocentric familiarity with one's own religion	Subjective
Egocentric / Impulsive CSP	**Physical / Non-Verbal Methods** or force consent to one's own religion				

Figure 13.1 Styles of strangeness and familiarity within the framework of inter-religious negotiation and religious styles.

Pedagogical arrangement of encounter with the strange: a new introduction to the Gift-to-the-Child *material*

The *Gift-to-the-Child* approach (cf. Hull 1996, 2000; Grimmitt *et al.* 1991a) has been designed at the University of Birmingham as a method of introducing children to a variety of religions. It suggests initiating the religious learning process by introducing a — potentially unknown — aspect of religion which is called a 'numen'. Fourteen booklets have been designed for use by the pupils. It is the special merit of this approach that it not only introduces material from a broad variety of religions, but also engages in a decisive elementarization process. Such reduction and concentration of the material on a religious phenomenon, a numen, allows a sensitive, step-by-step, response-eliciting learning process.

The *Gift-to-the-Child* procedure is particularly interesting because of its intentionally playful arrangement of *approaching* and *distancing*, its working with *familiarity* as well as with *difference* and *strangeness* in a pedagogically productive method. The child has, Hull says, 'a spiritual right to come close to religion but also a spiritual right not to come too close' (Hull 1996: 178). In a particular sequence however, Hull notes that these phases include the chance of encountering the unfamiliar and strange, but especially after the distancing devices are employed intentionally. It is assumed that the pedagogical process with the *Gift-to-the-Child* material begins with closeness and finishes with strangeness.

On closer scrutiny, however, there are experiences of strangeness and experiences of familiarity right at the beginning of this encountering process; and at the end of this process, there is not only distance, but feelings of familiarity may also develop. Therefore, I have designed the following table (Figure 13.2) which I regard as accordant with the *Gift-to-the-Child* approach:

For an understanding of the processes of children's encounter with, and introduction to, religion, it is of particular interest to observe what happens right at the beginning of this encountering process; and here we should be open to, and expect, both familiarity and strangeness. Here several possibilities are open; it probably makes a significant difference whether the numen belongs to the children's own or to their families' system of religious symbols or to those of another religion. In the *Gift-to-the-Child* approach, this contrast has been termed the difference between the gift for the believing child and the gift to the unbelieving child. The distinction appears to be somewhat rough, but it indicates that socialization may be an important factor for whether familiarity or strangeness arises and prevails. But other possibilities exist below this rough distinction: the child may be well informed and knowledgeable about a religion which is foreign to his or her family; or some symbols such as angels or God may belong to a common ground of symbols which several religions share in the perspective of the children or which belongs to a rather invisible or implicit religious symbol

	Familiarity	Strangeness
Engagement and Exploration	Familiarity as spontaneous recognition and / or identification with the numen	Strangeness as perplexity and astonishment (because of an unfamiliarity with the numen)
Contextualization and Reflection	Familiarity as reflective identification	Strangeness as reflective distance

Figure 13.2 Strangeness and familiarity in the *Gift-to-the-Child* approach.

system. Thus, the initial situation may be even more open and undetermined.

Furthermore, it should be taken into account that experiences of familiarity and strangeness arise not only in regard to the numen with which the classical *Gift-to-the-Child* lesson starts. Familiarity and strangeness develop also towards the classmates' religious view. Since the child does not encounter the numen merely individually, the interaction with the contextual variety of the peer group also needs to be taken into account when the numen is introduced. Familiarity and strangeness also develop in the pupil-to-pupil interaction in the classroom. The children may very soon form coalitions; they identify with or they dissociate themselves from the feelings of familiarity or strangeness of their peers. Finally, it must be taken into account that both strangeness and familiarity are not monolithic experiences and feelings. They each exist in many varieties. Figure 13.2 contrasts a more spontaneous, mainly *pre-reflective* strangeness (and familiarity) with *reflective* strangeness (and familiarity). Figure 13.1 includes and accounts for an even more diverse variety of styles of strangeness.

In summary, the *Gift-to-the-Child* procedure is interesting because of its intentional playful arrangement of *approaching* and *distancing*, its working with *familiarity* and with *strangeness* in a potentially productive way. We may, however, encounter a factor field in classroom interaction which is far more complex than that envisioned in the *Gift-to-the-Child* approach. With this expectation in mind, we move on to the classroom research.

Section 2: classroom research on strangeness: the *Gift-to-the Child* material at work

Research design

Given the limited empirical results on inter-religious classroom communication available so far, and given the fact that the special focus on pupils' reactions to strangeness has not yet been taken up in research, our research breaks new ground. This concerns not only the field of research, but also the method used. In order to complete a careful analysis of the children's

reactions, of dialogues between teacher and pupils and among the pupils themselves, the project design includes videotaping the first lessons in which the *Gift-to-the-Child* material is used. To document more thoroughly the feelings and thoughts which the pupils did not or could not express during the class period, 'simulated recall' interviews of approximately thirty minutes are scheduled immediately following the lesson in different rooms. Selected pupils, or pairs of pupils, are invited to watch the videotape of the lesson and comment upon it.

The videotapes of the lessons and the audio tapes of the simulated recall sessions, after transcription, are evaluated step by step (sequence analytical procedure) by interpretive methods. The visual documentation by video recording makes it possible to attend to the non-verbal expression. The main focus of evaluation is not on the structure and process of *teaching*, but on the *individual pupil reactions* to the stimuli provided by the teacher and by the comments of other pupils, which may be verbal or non-verbal. Through these instruments and evaluation procedures, a comprehensive portrait of the pupils' process of encounter with the religious phenomenon should be achieved.

Results

In the following, I present an analysis of two lessons documented during our research. They contrast in many regards, and this may inspire the direction of further research. A difference is obvious already in the demographics of the classes; the first lesson ('Angels') took place in a second-grade primary school class in which the pupils' parents are mostly members of either the Protestant or the Catholic Church, with only one exception – that of a Muslim child. This reflects the demographics of a middle class neighbourhood with a majority of indigenous families. The teacher has been class-teacher for this group for two years and has established clear and firm rules and arrangements in everyday classroom communication. The second lesson ('Call to Prayer'), in contrast, was recorded in a third-grade class of a school located in a neighbourhood of predominantly working class families with a significant percentage of Turkish immigrant families. Therefore, about half of the class are members of Muslim families, and the other half have mostly Protestant or Catholic parents. The teacher is relatively new to the class; she became their class-teacher half a year before the recording.

The lesson on 'Angels' (first recording)

Three large-size posters with pictures of angels – two of them were selected from the children's book on angels (Grimmitt *et al.* 1991b), a third one was an Islamic picture of an angel talking to Mohammed – were reproduced and hung on the blackboard, but covered with a white sheet. After inviting the children to come to the front of the classroom and form a 'cinema seating

arrangement', the pictures are unveiled. The teacher very sensitively asks the children to take time to look and observe what the pictures show; she repeatedly reminds them to continue looking for special details. The children thus first concentrate mostly on details: the spear, looks like a devil, stairway, angels with wings, Arabic script, crown of an angel, a horse or centaur. Can we observe reactions of strangeness on the part of the children? Not at all, if we attend to their verbal contributions which demonstrate how the children connect their observations with familiar knowledge. The children even 'know' more and have more specific ideas about their observations than the teacher is willing to accept and integrate in the course of classroom communication. The only signs of strangeness are non-verbal: one girl obviously feels very uncomfortable – we can see it in her face – when her classmate interprets the angel with the spear as being the devil. Experiences of strangeness appear to be only marginal and temporary.

The teacher then opens up a second phase of reactions from the children with the question: 'What are angels, really?' This changes the perspective significantly and the teacher apparently has a very precise intention: to elicit the children's own inner pictures and interpretations of angels. This impulse distracts the children's attention from the pictures on the wall and directs their attention to their inner world of imagination and knowledge. The children respond with many different ideas: 'flying people', 'souls of people', 'flying spirits', 'people after their death', 'God's servants', 'guardian angels'.

This is the occasion for the teacher to reinforce this focus; she asks 'Have you ever met an angel?' Immediately, we see the children following this line of thought and turning their attention further away from the pictures on the wall towards their inner world of experience. 'In a dream', one child says and expresses what will guide the conversation to follow. The children are eager to recount that they have dreamed of angels; but, despite all encouragement from the teacher, most of them say that they cannot remember details from their dreams. It seems likely that the children indeed cannot remember precisely enough to tell even a brief story; so we hear only details. One child tells about a bad dream, when the angel 'wanted to push me down out of the clouds'. Another remembers a dream of a castle in front of which there were two servants. This remembrance of angel dreams is the perfect introduction to the next step in the lesson: the teacher asks the children to draw a picture of an angel and she specifies that it should be an angel the children have seen in their dreams or an angel that they wish to be there.

In this lesson, it can be concluded, a 'piece of religion' has been introduced which produced no reaction of strangeness in the sense of inter-religious encounter with a specific religion or religious symbol. It did not produce reactions of familiarity in the sense of identifying this aspect as belonging to one's own religious community over against the background of other religions. Rather, the symbolic representations of the angels on the wall elicit shared internal symbolic representations. Only some representational details produce some irritation and some temporary reactions of

strangeness; and the more the attention is directed away from the posters on the wall and toward the inner representations of the children, the more we observe the prevalence of familiarity. The encounter with an angel in one's *dreams* is not an experience of pure familiarity. It is an experience of an internal realm below conscious reflection and control which gives rise to strange images, events and stories.

If we look for an explanation for this prevalence of familiarity, we may, in the first place, point to the specific character of the numen selected. Angels appear to belong to the kind of numena of which supposedly every child raised in the Christian and Islamic religious cultures has some more or less veiled, but familiar experience. The teacher apparently anticipates the prevalence of familiarity with angels and she functions as a catalyst for the children to express and communicate their internal experiences of familiarity and transitory strangeness.

The lesson 'Call to Prayer' (second recording).

The teacher begins by recalling the previous lesson in which, for preparation, various signal sounds were identified. Then the call to prayer sound is played as a kind of surprise, a kind of quiz game, to see if the children are able to identify the signal sound they hear from audio-tape. The children could not have anticipated that they would listen to a 'piece of religion'. Thus, the play of alternatives between strangeness and familiarity is wide open.

The children use their freedom of interpretation – at least in the beginning. Already after the first segment of the call, we hear a joyful outcry from many in the classroom: they have an idea what it is. After the second segment of the call, we hear the children laugh aloud. This laughter is an expression of strangeness – a strangeness which is probably due to the German children's unfamiliarity with Arabic language, especially with its guttural consonant sound, and due also to their unfamiliarity with the melody of the call. It is estrangement by the sound of a foreign language and the music of a public announcement, rather than the encounter with the foreign religion or belief system which elicits such reactions. Nevertheless, we observe an unconstrained expression of strangeness here. As far as we can interpret this non-verbal expression, no xenophobic or xeno-polemic strangeness is visible here, but rather a kind of exotic dissonance.

A few seconds later – it all happens within seconds – we notice a very rapid whispering communication among the children; a message spread out through the class. Also we notice that fewer children laugh after hearing the third segment of the call. This is surprising. Both observations are closely connected, as we later learn from children who confirm that the message went round that one ought not to laugh when the call to prayer sounds. We also hear from a group of girls that some of the Muslim boys frightened them by explaining that there will be punishment from the Almighty for all

who laugh when the call sounds. In one of the simulated-recall interviews, three girls report (S., N. and L. speaking simultaneously):

> And then he just said that we will die at fifty 'cause and the other boys said that as well./Because we've been laughing/F. and J. [. . .] yes they always said they always said that we will die at fifty/because we've been laughing./Yes because we've been laughing/and he is laughing himself about it/And I also noticed that J. also sometimes made like this, that he was grinning/Then we can tell them that we have proof on video . . .

This may also be the reason why some of the children ask to hear the call to prayer a second time: they want to demonstrate, as reparation for their offence, that they are able to listen without laughing. After the lesson, in the schoolyard, the girls were taken to task and reproached by some Muslim boys. The girls reported also that the boys kicked and pushed them so that one girl fell down. Such verbally threatening and rude behaviour – the boys obviously felt entitled to actively anticipate a bit of the punishment of the Last Judgement – was directed especially against a Muslim girl whose family originated not from Turkey, but from Kosovo.

With the help of this background information which came to light in the simulated recall interviews, we can better understand what was going on in the classroom at that moment. The reason for this surprisingly sudden quietness and suppression of laughter are explicit and firm religious beliefs which have suddenly come on stage. However, these religious beliefs and the prohibition of laughing do not come as issues to think and talk about, but as unquestioned and unquestionable beliefs and norms reinforced by fear of punishment. In terms of our framework of strangeness and familiarity, we can say that suddenly a quite strong feeling of familiarity has entered the scene – a familiarity which is based on an egocentric perspective and which denies any alternative. We can conclude that this strong and dominating breaking-in of egocentric familiarity paired with xeno-polemical strangeness has taken over and interrupted the play of strangeness and familiarity toward the numen which the *Gift-to-the-Child* material is supposed to produce.

This interruption divides the class. Some of the children, especially the Muslim boys, establish their version of familiarity and strangeness. Other children who are not familiar with the call to prayer are no longer free to direct their curiosity toward the numen, they are no longer free to react with their own feelings of strangeness or familiarity, but find themselves in a position of forced reaction to the powerful communication of a specific Islamic theological interpretation of religious norms brought forth by their Muslim male classmates. We could understand this event in the classroom as an accident, as subversion or distortion of the ideal course of steps as proposed by the *Gift-to-the-Child* material; but this is real life in the classroom and we must reckon with such unexpected effects.

This division among the children pre-structures the next phase of the lesson; the Muslim boys — one of them became the real 'expert' — are called to come to the blackboard and explain to the rest of the class how Muslims pray and other details of Islamic praxis. The familiarity of these 'experts' with their religion stands in the foreground and is dominating. Even the teacher is less certain about some issues and submits to the authority of the student 'experts'. The boys' very active participation and relatively broad knowledge anticipates at least some of the contextualization stage planned for a later phase in this lesson with the pictures of *Yaseen's Book* (Grimmitt *et al.* 1991c).

What did the non-Islamic children do, how did they feel? We can observe that many, especially the girls, have their fingers on their lips or put them into their mouth; it looks as if some want to hide their faces. This could be a non-verbal sign indicating a feeling of estrangement about the issues talked about; it could also be some sign of frustration that the male 'experts' on Islam dominate the communicative situation. We don't know for sure. One boy, holding his open hands at his ears, asks 'Why do they do this?' His question was not answered. A girl wants to ask a question, but is ignored. Strangeness on the part of the non-Islamic children develops, but it comes to expression only at the margins. The feeling of familiarity of the Islamic boys dominates. Some girls get tired and lose interest. 'Impressive, what you already know', says the teacher — thinking only of the 'experts' in Islam.

Discussion and conclusions

Some conclusions can be drawn from our study: first, the factor field of inter-religious classroom communication appears to be far more complex than accounted for in the *Gift-to-the-Child* conception. Our research reveals that the classroom reality is not always the fulfilment of the curriculum design-ers' dreams. Granted, the interplay of entering ('coming in') and distancing ('coming out') is an ingenious and highly productive pedagogical idea which deserves further consideration, application and development; and the input of the material has proven to be productive in eliciting strangeness and familiarity. However, our classroom research indicates that strangeness and familiarity cannot easily be predicted and confined within a clear-cut curric-ular mechanism.

Second, the experiences of strangeness and familiarity are related to and recall 'lived religion', which may consist in a shared experience of the numen, for example in dreams and so on, but also may derive from a firm and sometimes narrow or even fundamentalist religious socialization. We may or may not like the kind of religiosity with which the Islamic boys con-front the rest of the class, including the teacher — reflecting powerful ele-ments from their religion, practised and passed on in their families and religious communities. If we appreciate the coming-into-play of lived

religion in the classroom (which I do appreciate), we may also invite 'strange' beliefs such as the fear of hell, and proscriptions such as the prohibition of laughing. This has consequences for what to expect in further research, but also for teaching arrangements using this material.

Third, the difference between the reaction of the 'believing child' and the reaction of the 'unbelieving child', turns out to be more influential than we anticipated; it may even polarize a class. We observe a polarity here which needs to be considered when we start constructing a typology of classroom reactions to religious phenomena. On the other hand, as the 'Angels' lesson demonstrates, any clear-cut distinction between belief and unbelief may be challenged. 'Believing' and 'unbelieving' are used to refer to the child's religious belonging to, and socialization in, his or her family or religious community – or not so belonging etc. as the case may be; however, some experiences – in our case, of angels – may subvert this assumption of a clear-cut distinction. 'Lived religion', as a 'sense of the Holy' (Heimbrock 2004) must also be taken seriously as a precondition which pupils may bring with them into their religious education lessons. Another highly influential factor therefore is the *type* of numen with which the lesson starts. Does it elicit a clear reaction of beliefs and prescriptions by at least part of the class or does it elicit more or less latent experiences or feelings which the majority of children bring with them?

Fourth, teachers are a factor in the force field. They bring into play not only personal convictions and interpretations, but also their teaching styles; and it is possible that they may also experience estrangement, namely in face of an unexpectedly strange kind of religion, for example fundamentalist beliefs and prescriptions, or because of the children's innocent disregard for theological correctness.

Finally, one of the most significant observations is the dependency of the classroom reactions on the style of strangeness and familiarity (which may give some importance to the scales which I have presented in Figure 13.1). If curiosity develops and prevails, as in the angels lesson, the flow of interaction between strangeness and familiarity can take its course – allowing the children to express their feelings of unexpected strangeness, perplexity and inability to grasp it. This is a very productive situation developmentally and educationally. If, on the contrary, anxiety and fear enter the scene, styles of strangeness may dominate the interaction, arresting the flow of curiosity and impeding the potential for further development and learning.

As an outlook for further research, we admit that our conclusions are based on a small amount of empirical observation. More detailed accounts of the interplay of strangeness and familiarity in the classroom could be expected from a comparison of more and different classroom interactions not only in Germany, but also in the UK. This would also enable us to better account for the context of regional and national conditions for the children's inter-religious encounter.

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