

How can a Holistic Approach Be Successful? (Response to Elisabeth Naurath's Keynote)

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Thank you for so many important ideas! By hearing this, my opinions can be summed up in the following question: How can a holistic approach be successful?

There was a lot of Elisabeth Naurath's keynote that I agree with and can build upon and take forward. Thank you very much. I was particularly pleased that she quoted Robin Wall Kimmerer. In her book "Braiding Sweetgrass" (Kimmerer, 2020) Kimmerer describes the mismatch between a scientific and a religious perspective. The one seems to be incompatible with the other. But the opposite is actually the case: Elisabeth Naurath's plea to overcome a one-sided approach is basically what has been recurring in the European humanities tradition since the Romantic period at the latest. Wall Kimmerer's approach of understanding biology and religion not as opposites but as complementary is therefore to be welcomed. In my opinion, other cultures, such as the Latin American tradition of "buen vivir" (Acosta, 2015), are a step further in this respect, and we can learn a lot from liberation theology. Joanna Macy's theology (Macy & Brown, 2014) with a Buddhist perspective also provides important insights here.

This brings us to mutual learning: I was amused to see that Elisabeth Naurath thinks that the ecotheological turn is better developed in Catholic theology. For a long time, I held the opposite view, namely that ecotheology was more developed in Protestant theology. However, I have since moved away from this "competitive way of thinking". I believe it is time to emphasize the common ground and shared understanding across denominations and religions.

The Catholic tradition of the bouquet of herbs on the feast of the Assumption is just as important and relevant as, for example, the rituals around the feast of Narouz or the many rituals of thanksgiving for the harvest. It is precisely through such religious practices that the connectedness that Mrs Naurath rightly calls for is practiced. I would like to add a few reflections:

1. Gratitude and Retinity

In Christian theological discussion, the terms “retinity” and “gratuity” have been introduced as principles of social ethics alongside connectedness (Birkel, 2020). Retinity, from the Latin rete, 'net', refers to the interconnectedness of all things and people. The principle of gratuity is the less known. It describes the fact that something is done or given for free. This attitude comes from the experience of having received something for nothing. In the context of Matthew 10:8b, gratuitousness means giving without personal gain. Everyone should have areas in their life where something is given free of charge. In education for sustainable development, the attitudes of retinity and gratuitousness offer an opportunity to bridge the gap between knowledge and action.

2. The Importance of Religious Education for Sustainable Development (rESD)

Drawing upon many years of experience I can say that there has been at least some movement in this area in recent years. When I submitted my doctoral thesis on this topic over 20 years ago (Birkel, 2002), I faced many hurdles, especially as a woman. A holistic, interdisciplinary approach was viewed with skepticism at the time. Fortunately, after more than 20 years, we are one step further and the interdenominational and interfaith rESD working group has been meeting regularly since 2020 to promote mutual learning and exchange. This is an interfaith approach characterised by specific themes. It is united by the common goal of making the world a better place for all. From the outset, there is a relationship of trust that others think in a similar way, but from different perspectives. And it is this interweaving of perspectives that characterises learning.

3. Whole Institution Approach / School of Transformation and Sustainability (STS)

The importance of a holistic approach has long been recognised in the ESD debate (Holst et al., 2024). However, this still requires a great deal of work. UNESCO's call for a holistic approach in educational institutions (UNESCO, 2014) is still a long way off, at least in universities.

Now I would like to do a little advertising for myself: Along with Eberswalde and Leuphana, the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt

(KU) is one of the few universities in Germany that consistently pursues a holistic approach (KU, n.d.). It is therefore important that sustainability is practiced in all fields of the university's activities. Not only research and teaching play important roles, but also the sustainable management of the campus. Is the food fair and regional? Is there waste separation? Are CO₂ emissions recorded and minimized? Student involvement in sustainability in the Green Office is just as important as are administrative structures: how transparent are the university's processes? How can everyone be involved in decision-making? How can exclusion be avoided? The WIA addresses these questions. In my experience, many students and lecturers are not aware of this approach.

In addition to the Whole Institution Approach, last year the KU opened the School of Transformation and Sustainability (STS) (KU, 2023). The aim of STS is to make religious education expertise more visible and better integrated into the university as a whole, and to adopt an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspective. Mutual learning is possible here, for example between economists and theologians.

4. Inter- and Transdisciplinary Work at the University

While I cannot speak for everyone, I do have the impression that religious education and practical theology have long acknowledged the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation. For practical theologians, working with climate scientists and integrating their expertise is a matter of course. At conferences with climate scientists, I sometimes take the liberty of asking the other way round: what do you need from theology? Where are you not making progress on your own? Often there is no answer. And so I share Mrs Naurath's thesis that theological discussions, such as the body-soul theories, can at least be considered, if not shared, by natural scientists. A distinction must be made here between the so-called day and night sciences. The day sciences focus on what can be precisely measured and counted. They show empirical evidence, which is very important.

But the night sciences are also important. They deal with the imponderable, the not really tangible. Scientists Martin Lercher and Itai Yanai emphasize the importance of dialogue between the sciences (Yanai & Lercher, 2016), especially between the natural sciences and the humanities. The point is to stimulate new, creative processes. In this sense, theology could also serve as an inspiration for creative processes in the field of creation narratives.

5. Transformation Capacities

Take, for instance, the development of utopias or the ability to shape the future. Those who are able to imagine possible futures for different scenarios are less surprised by developments and therefore remain more capable of acting (Bremer & Kuhnhenne, 2017). The ability to act, in turn, leads to self-efficacy. And this is exactly what students need, given the pessimistic outlook for the future. Transformative learning is set in motion when students engage in the experience of the real. When they experience for themselves that familiar thought patterns and answers no longer fit current challenges and questions. When this experience is available, they will search for appropriate answers and judgements themselves. On the one hand, this requires knowledge of the system. How can we describe the current, how did something come to be the way it is? On the other hand you also need a sense of purpose like it is done in the “A Rounder Sense of Purpose (RSP)” (Vare, 2018a; Vare, 2018b). In other words, you need to know where you want to go. This is done in exchange with other actors. How do we want to make the world fit for the future? Finally, knowledge of transformation is also needed (Wolff, 2022).

How do we arrive at these new forms? Which actors need to be involved? What experiments need to be carried out? A new concept of learning at universities is also needed to help develop such knowledge.

6. A New Concept of University Learning

Our universities are generally not compatible with this new concept of learning. Again and again, I see students asking at the beginning of the semester which topic they should work on. Once they have it, they usually give an excellent lecture on it. But the rest of the time they are not in class. We have developed a spiral of transformative learning at STS, which unfortunately has not yet been published. It has to do with practicing connectedness and compassion, but also systematic knowledge and complex thinking in all areas, not just religious education. In education the STS interacts with biology, geography, social sciences and theology. Learning takes place in the areas of new thinking, new awareness and new action. This is where the inter-religiousness that Mrs Naurath mentioned comes into play. It is exciting to learn how different religions and indigenous peoples live by examining, for example, the importance of plants. Are there similarities, for example, between the monastic medicine of Hildegard von Bingen and the experience of indigenous peoples with

medicinal plants? How do I learn gratitude? And how do I learn to wait? A university garden, for example, is a good place to learn these things. Students can lend a hand and learn the value of planting, tending, letting things happen, being at the mercy of heat, drought or even floods. The aim is to bring biology, geography and theology together in education. Only in this way can connectedness become the spiritual basis of an ESD that is not only religious.

To illustrate this connection, I invite you to take part in a short exercise: I have collected walnuts from our tree at home and brought them to the conference (by reading this text you have to imagine a walnut). Look closely at it. What does it look like? Feel the surface. Squeeze the shell a little. Feel how hard it is. Smell it. There is a huge tree inside this little nut. You decide: Do you crack the nut to get to the delicious nut inside? Or do you take the nut home and plant it? If you do, and the seed sprouts, you will ideally feel this connection of the congress for many years to come. This way, the connectedness we heard about from Mrs Naurath, can become real and we can hopefully benefit from it for many years to come. Thank you!

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