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Social Commitment: Voluntary, Obligatory? A Theological View on the Freedom of a Christian

Abstract: In this article I would like to highlight our Erasmus+ K1 project concerning the aspect of 'voluntary social engagement' in a German vocational school and focus on the aspect of 'voluntary', taking into account theological topics – including 'Free Will', the "new man" of St. Paul, and the problems of 'power and temptation' – before finally drawing conclusions for project work in the field of social engagement from the perspective of theology. An empirical attempt will be made to connect statements of youngsters about their image of God and the consequences of this to the aims of social engagement. From the qualitative methodology of grounded theory, categories emerge which can be crucial for concepts of social engagement.

Keywords: Erasmus+, voluntary, social engagement, free will, new man, power, temptation, project work, refugees, competences, qualitative research, grounded theory

Erasmus+ project: social commitment in the educator's profession and learning

At St. Ursula Berufskolleg in Düsseldorf, we see volunteer social commitment as an integral part of the students' studies – and as a key to Europe. At our school we encourage students' social commitment, which we call volunteer commitment. Over the course of about three years, they

can demonstrate this commitment by, for example, spending time in a nearby youth club after school, or in evening classes during term time.

The project came about following exploratory discussions with colleagues from Belfast, Krakow and Düsseldorf surrounding the importance for our students to experience social engagement in a variety of contexts. It was agreed that students from the three countries could experience this best through engaging with children in a number of different placement settings in a variety of contexts, including working with refugees, the homeless and the travelling community, which reflect those in society who are marginalized.

The main subjects will be dealing with 'social commitment' in the educator's profession and learning. The aim of integrating social commitment within the training of qualified educators has already been translated into action in Düsseldorf in the course of several projects. For example, a project called "Equal Opportunities and Solidarity: Working with Refugees" has been established at St. Ursula Berufskolleg.

This means, in practice, that a number of socially committed students regularly gather together in order to try to find suitable ways of supporting refugees. At the moment, activities take place in the field of intercultural encounters through cooperative games, cooking and eating together, and doing intercultural artistic workshops. Last year students were committed to educational support, games and sports as well as language lessons for refugees. They were also able to show their social engagement by being responsible for a machine which sells fair trade chocolate.

Gaining competences, learning on the job

The personal competences that are to be acquired by the students over the course of the placement are as follows:

- Minimizing feelings of strangeness
- Developing a tolerance for ambiguity

- Acquiring and refining additional language skills
- Dealing with personal challenges
- Developing and refining intercultural competences
- Dealing with different educational and training concepts in Europe
- Gathering insights into the world of children in the Czech Republic, the UK, and Poland

> In the meantime, trainers also value this form of learning in order to provide their junior staff with the technical knowledge as well as the personal and social skills required by future employees in the increasingly complex world of work. Personal skills such as empathy, sensitivity, tolerance, resilience, flexibility and initiative are not only in demand for service-oriented occupations and customer contact. These competencies are just as important when it comes to respectfully interacting with one another in one's own team, taking responsibility for one's own actions, finding new solutions or dealing with very different people in unpredictable situations. In addition, social learning is also considered to be an important training-integrating offer, since in view of the shortage of new talent, training institutions and inter-company educational institutions will increasingly be confronted with applicants of various educational qualifications in the coming years. (Sturm 2015).

Some words from the reflections of two interns talking about their social commitment support these views. One of them said:

> During our meeting with the Eritreans as part of our preparations for the internship, we encountered many stories and impressions. I was very surprised how open and positive these people are with you if you just gave them a chance. They were visibly grateful and pleased that we showed an interest in them and their stories. They talked to us about their families, how they live, where they work, what plans they have for the future, and

> what they are doing at home. There were stories and impressions that made us think that many of them had mastered German better after 6 to 12 months than some inhabitants who have already been living and working in Germany for years.

This brings me to my next point, that of losing the social preoccupation with many of our prejudices – the prejudices that we are not even aware of, which may be given to us by the media and society, which we do not necessarily perceive but that could still be dormant somewhere within us. Another intern talked about how social engagement enhances people's knowledge, how self-esteem can be strengthened by small things.

> We found that qualities such as empathy, tolerance, acceptance, appreciation, and helpfulness are very important, especially in educators' education. These are qualities that also have to be present to a great extent in social commitment, but above all that have to be strengthened and trained, which can be all the more helpful both in retrospect and before or during training. In addition, patience and dedication are important issues that play a role in both areas.

The routine of our project and problems with volunteering

The routine of our project is as follows: applying for a grant for a project about social engagement in Europe, obtaining EU money for this – asking for voluntary commitment from the students – helping students to gain competences – sending these students to Europe (on international placements) – reporting the results of the project – applying for a grant for another project, and thereby beginning the process anew.

But it has turned out that voluntary commitment on paper is not always voluntary in life. One of my pupils once asked me: "I have been to the youth club meeting refugees four times now. Is that enough?" It was enough, I said, thinking about two words: 'commitment' and 'voluntary'.

Free will in showing one's commitment is very often limited by the students' and professionals' strategic questions: Does it fit into my timetable, and do I want to spend my spare time on it? Teachers could argue the same from a different position – not every educator is searching for ways to link formal and informal education.

But our partners from the Catholic youth agency that runs the youth club also have such questions: In the youth club everybody is welcome who wants to meet there, but do we accept that teachers from formal education systems should cooperate with us? Do we want to see them visiting their pupils in our rooms? Do we want to allow agents from such school systems to use our equipment and our infrastructure, which should be at the service of non-formal, non-directed youth work?

How much freedom, free will and volunteering is possible in interactions between Erasmus+ projects, schools, pupils, teachers, institutions, social workers, refugees and voluntary senior helpers? So many institutions and people, with their formal and informal roles, are trying to find a way to take action. Things become even more complicated when taking into account the criteria for good engagement.

Successful participation depends on the right framework conditions

The following questions help with critically analyzing planned participation processes (Flügge, Gerrits and Wenzl 2013: 157–168):

1. Relevance: Does the voluntary social commitment relate to the lifeworld of the target group and is this relevant to them?
2. Support: Are there enough relevant advocates in the public who support the project?
3. Voluntary: Has it been ensured that participants are not required to participate against their will?

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On the Freedom of a Christian

This leads me straight into an old theological discussion, which has been explored by Saint Paul, Saint Augustine and Martin Luther, who wrote on it in his *On the Freedom of a Christian* (Luther 2017):

"A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone". Luther says: "Although these statements appear contradictory, when they are found to agree together, they will be highly serviceable to my purpose." These are also both statements of Paul himself, who says: "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all" (1 Cor. 9:19).

This means, in regard to our project, that in being a Christian, in the eyes of Luther, we are not free to help and to serve, as this should already be in our nature.

Consider the example of the helpless refugees coming into Europe and Germany.

As Christians, there should not be a single doubt about whether we are free to help or not. The matter should be as clear as water: we should serve. And now, our reality: even those amongst us who consider themselves as Christians have doubts about whether this is possible: "What about our job, our time, our family, our spare time, political guidelines… we cannot take everybody, we cannot help everybody".

Martin Luther tries to explain this in his work *On the Freedom of a Christian*:

> Let us examine the subject on a deeper and less simple principle. Man is composed of a twofold nature, a spiritual and a bodily. As regards the spiritual nature, which they name the soul, he is called the spiritual, inward, new man; as regards the bodily nature, which they name the flesh, he is called the fleshly, outward, old man (…) The result of this diversity is that in the Scriptures opposing statements are made concerning the same man; the fact being that in the same man these two men are opposed to

one another; the flesh lusting against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh (Gal. 5:17). (Luther 2017)

Regarding the spiritual nature, we have charity, commitment, helping each other – in short, voluntary social commitment!

Regarding the bodily nature, we have all-powerful things: structures, positions, contracts, borders – in short, *reality*.

On temptation

Let us talk about temptation like the Salzburgian theologian Hans-Joachim Sander does, like the Bible does, like Jesus does. Why is there, as far as I know, no *temptation* to fulfil one's 'spiritual nature', to do the good things: charity, commitment, helping each other? Why is temptation always the '*old man*'? Structures, positions, contracts, borders, *reality*.

This is what Hans-Joachim Sander from the University of Salzburg, Austria identifies as a fundamental and paradoxical gap between power and powerlessness, fundamental for every aspect of 'Christian dogmatics'.

Every Christian icon, such as the cross, is in the twilight zone between man's powerlessness and God's powerfulness, and, even more paradoxically, between God's powerlessness and man's power. This dialectic process is theologically and existentially opened to a third dimension: at Pentecost, this third dimension between power and powerlessness emerges – the Holy Spirit.

This paradox, in my opinion, can be depicted in three stages:

- Freedom and bondage
- Old man and new man
- Power and powerlessness

Temptation always leads us, following Sander, to bondage (using people, oppressing people, prostituting people), to the old man (position,

hierarchy) and to the admiration of power (in business, in politics, in sports, in war).

It is quite curious that this is even possible when talking about religion. Calling himself a religious Christian official, Sander says that talking about God can be very creative, but leads to the temptation of hypocrisy: "He who speaks of God cannot avoid his power, but at the same time he invites all sorts of self-righteousness. This is not God's self-righteousness. It is the self-righteousness of those who use God for the sake of their salvation, in which, at the same time, ominous desires lurk over others" (Sander 2017). Remember the Augustinian reflection about freedom, the new man and the paradox of the powerless man on the cross .

The question of God amongst youngsters: The key to social engagement?

The interesting thing about all this is that the first students who showed their social engagement to some extent and then went abroad some years ago (before our Erasmus+ project started) tend to know the question I am dealing with, and this comes by asking them questions about their image of God.

Questioning and Study Methods (see Prokopf and Ziebertz 2001)

How do these youngsters who we know and who are willing to be socially engaged think and talk about God? This study of the images of God held by young people attending our school was designed to reach conclusions about the religiousness of this particular demographic group in order to find a base for religious communication. For the purpose of practical religious education, such knowledge is important in order to understand the starting point of religious processes. From a scientific point of view, this study aims to understand the 'semantics of talking about

God' and make a competent contribution to theological dialogue in the modern age.

The study began by asking questions in an empirically descriptive fashion: How do young people think and talk about God today? What are the religious semantics attached to their image of God (e.g. linguistic images, symbols, concepts)?

The empirical material for this work was provided by a larger study under the title *Korrelation von christlicher Tradition und individueller religiöser Semantik* (see Prokopf 2008). In connection to this work, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted. These were guided by a questionnaire on topics such as the 'functional aspects' of religion (dealing with crises, the meaning of life, etc.) and the substantial aspects of religion (e.g. the image of God held by young people) as well. Three young people have been chosen as examples in this paper for their very differing views of God. The interview segments, in turn, will be evaluated in two steps.

The newer method of 'Grounded Theory' is built on action and decision-making theories (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Several concepts guide the analysis: the phenomenon to be explained (the image of God), the phenomenon's origins, the context in which it plays out, and its intervening influences which follow in turn. Its origins and context are the spaces in which action and interaction strategies arise. Finally, there are consequences which may be deduced from the course of events. The interviews are then analyzed according to the following categorical questions:

(1) How do the respondents describe their image of God (the phenomenon)?
(2) What were the origins that led to this particular image of God?
(3) What is the context? What are the intervening influences on this image of God?
(4) What interaction strategies may be derived from this image of God?
(5) What are the consequences derived from this image of God by the respondents?

The extensive coding of the relevant segments cannot be shown here for reasons of space (for more details with regard to the handling thereof, see Prokopf 2008).

For our methodology, we have used Oevermann's technique of 'Objective Hermeneutics'. Oevermann's concept of the latent structure of meaning (objective structures of significance within interaction) is useful here. Its reality is independent of one's personal life history and the exact historical point of interpretational decoding (Oevermann et al. 1979: 381ff.). The analysis is based on reconstructing the structure of the interview, one which the respondents are not necessarily aware of. From a knowledge theory point of view, this methodology may be termed as 'abductive', since a new theory is being generated through the combination of previous knowledge and new experience (Prokopf 2003). Oevermann developed four category pairs to clarify the connections between 'old' and 'new' in a concrete case structure:

(1) Reproductive yet simultaneously transformational: Every action taken, or statement made, may be identified as the transformation and possibly reproduction of a tradition. If a statement is split into sequences then options for decision-making become obvious, which were chosen with a view to an uncertain future. These contain moments where tradition is carried on, but also moments where tradition has been overtaken, i.e. transformed (see Oevermann 1991: 274).

(2) Particular yet simultaneously general: A case is 'particular' because it contains a concrete individual life practice which is not applicable to others. At the same time, every case is 'general' because it makes a "claim to being generally applicable and justifiable" (Oevermann 1991: 272).

(3) A diachronic yet simultaneously synchronic structure: The course of the process taken in a structure of interaction has a visible development (diachronic structure). Synchronic structures indicate the active presence of a background which is not brought to light during the interview (see Oevermann 1991: 274).

(4) Discontinuing and continuing courses of latent structures of meaning: Structures of interaction may be separated from each other and regarded separately (see Oevermann 1991: 274). A continuing process, which is constantly being interrupted, is visible in the background. Continuity is (also) established through breaks in continuity.

These category pairs allow us to view an image of God in its 'double' form: on the one hand as an individual, 'newly'-created image, as a unique example, as a personal, partially syncretic 'mix' of selected traditions. On the other hand, we may also see it as a revelation of a store of symbols, which draws on transmitted (already present) base patterns and decision-making options.

With this double methodological base, we are looking to grasp not only the symbolic contexts consciously used by young people, but also the latent horizon of meaning where these symbols are to be found.

How do voluntarily socially engaged young people talk about God?

The Structure of Philip's image of God

Philip's image of God is marked by the absolute transcendence of a "higher power" and "energy" which cannot be explained by man. This power does not touch him in any way. On the other hand, he expresses the closeness of this "divine force" by characterizing it as an "energy" which is present in each of us, and to which all souls return. For Philip, this "divine energy" is both transcendent and immanent. This 'middle position' is defined as "Panentheism" (Pieper and van der Ven 1998). Philip does not speak of a personal God who leads every single individual, but of an impersonal omnipresent energy which he calls "Braman" (after the Hindu breath of life). At the same time, this energy sets off a process which works differently in each of us and aims to "unify all souls". Philip describes this as a "spiritual base for taking action", present in every person

and part of a stream of energy which surrounds everything and makes "things happen".

The origin of Philip's image of God lies in his belief in the supernatural. He assumes that there are many things which give off forces and energy, whose origin is unknown and which words cannot describe. The "inexplicable" is a natural part of this world and goes beyond the human realm of understanding. Philip does, however, also believe that this "inexplicable" matter will one day become something quite natural in our daily lives, and that it will then be comprehensible.

Philip's ideas play out within the context of a world where the immaterial and the inexplicable have their set places. According to Philip, much of what influences the world is immeasurable, unconscious or invisible. He does not answer the question about whether these mysterious forces surrounding every one of us, which he calls "aura", have something to do with God. He does, however, find the existence of guardian angels believable.

Strategies for taking action within Philip's image of God are limited to imaginary and sentimental worlds on the numinous level. He speaks of secret powers, such as "fortune telling" and "mind reading", which may be irrational or speculative, but may also be learnt through a random inner examination. He describes his faith as "non-non-faith", and has difficulties summing up its content.

One consequence of Philip's image of God is 'faith in the soul', which is intertwined with his religious views. He assumes that there is a place where all souls come from and to which they return in a cyclical fashion after death. A part of this unity described by Philip, the origin and destination of all things, is anchored in each of us. This corresponds to the "spiritual basis for taking action", which is a part of the omnipresent divine force and, simultaneously, Philip's most prominent image of God.

The Structure of Lucia's image of God

Lucia's image of God is based on the doubt she has in the existence of a personal God. She speaks of a higher power that she believes in. This

"higher power" is the incorporation of the good in the universe and appears to her in the form of her conscience. This conscience has a very concrete influence on her life. The belief in the "higher power" manifesting itself within her conscience is connected to her belief in herself and her friends.

The origin of her belief in a "higher power" lies in the repeated experience of crisis in her life. She is not always sure of herself, and sometimes the behaviour of her friends puzzles her. In order to find stability in this life of uncertainty and crises, Lucia trusts her conscience. It is not exactly "God directly" that speaks to her through her conscience, but rather a higher power that is capable of guiding her life and is available to her in times of difficulty.

The context of this image of God is Lucia's displeasure with the banality and uniformity of her everyday life. She is neither satisfied with the role she takes on in school and her professional development, nor with the role she takes on at home with her family. She looks for a meaning within this dissatisfaction. She does so in the very concrete form of a conversation with her conscience, which, to her, is capable of bringing some sense and order since it is in contact with a "higher power". She is disappointed with the Church as an institution and is not optimistic for the future of her relationship with it. She does not trust her vicar, who she describes as conservative. She finds church services to be boring and monotonous. She can also not imagine there being a "God in heaven", an idea she finds illogical. She does, however, assume that she is being guided onto the right paths by a higher power through her conversations with her conscience. She feels that her conscience not only gives her solace in cases of painful, personal hurt, but that it also inspires hope.

Lucia has developed a strategy for taking action, which she calls "prayer". She is referring to regular walks in the dark where, as she puts it, she talks to herself, her conscience and maybe another person. The reflection and conscience probing that she goes through in the dark has a clarifying and inspiring effect on her. She is not clear on whether this "prayer" is actually heard or not, but the only important thing for her is finding herself and feeling at peace while doing so.

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The consequence of Lucia's world view is, surprisingly, that God is "good". A person led by his or her conscience is somebody who is at peace and helping to create "heaven on Earth". This abstract image of God, the "conscience", is rendered more concrete – God's intentions for people are good.

The Structure of Lea's image of God

Lea assumes that every person has an individual "higher power" at his or her side, which protects the person in times of need. This power can be undefined, nebulous or even unreachable. Lea believes that this "higher power" is "individual" for each person and that it is a part of a greater "unity power", which she identifies with the Hindu breath of life, Karma.

The most important origin of Lea's individualistic image of God lies in her presumption of man's and God's dependence on each other. According to Lea, God exists because man is continuously creating him in thought. For man, too, however, belief is essential to life. She claims that God's death would mean the death of mankind, too, as all hope would be lost.

Her strategy for taking action in relation to the question of God focuses on the individual speech of God. She sees the latter as a constant challenge to define 'God' again and again according to her individual experiences. Her own attitudes are the basis for this definition, which is constantly in a state of change. Lea openly speaks of the need for a personal construction of divine images.

The consequence of Lea's thoughts about God is that man must take the place of God, that "religion" has to step back. The figure of a "higher power" can only be identified through the ideas and pictures that arise when a person has experiences through and with it. She does, however, insist that this dependence is two-sided. Man is dependent on hope and, as such, on the higher power that gives him the hope and protection that he needs. The person creating his or her personal image of God is not completely free and is even dependent on this image of God.

Empirical conclusions in the context of theory

These three cases point out, in a very practical sense, what religious sociological theories have been considering for years. Some central concepts used to build these theories are: religiousness has syncretic characteristics; religiousness is in a process of deinstitutionalization; a central characteristic of modern religiousness is individuality; and, finally, religious attitudes have a constructivistic content. We intend to show these theoretical concepts within the empirical data. This will build a bridge between empirical descriptions and theory construction. This can only be done in a summary style.

Syncretism: Philip uses several traditions to describe his image of God. He uses the concept of a soul, which has Christian connotations, along with Hindu traditions (Braman).

Having lost the relief function of religious institutions, the individual today must search for "fundamental unity" within the horizon of openness and personal responsibility. This is why syncretism is a "socially spread form for dealing with religious pluralism" (Dubach and Campiche 1993).

Individualization: In the form of her conscience, Lucia has a very subjective and individual bridge to God.

The loss of plausibility experienced by traditional religious patterns as a product of the increasing specialization of society leads to a release of religious decision-making and experience: "The developed modern age clears the way for lasting reflexive forms of religious action and experience as a subjective reconstruction of the Christian faith" (Kaufmann 1989).

Constructivism: Lea openly says that every person must construct their own image of God, and she also sees this as a simple necessity.

The presently differentiated form of society no longer allows "the representation of the unity of society in society" (Luhmann 1977), because modern society is composed of complex and differentiated subsystems that recursively orient themselves through a special form of the system-environment relationship that seeks to construct its own continuity – in short, the unity of society can only be defined pluralistically (Luhmann 1989).

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In the following theological hermeneutical analysis, we would like to consider these four theoretical concepts again. The question is whether – and, if so, in what ways – Christian content is present in the syncretic, deinstitutionalized, individualistic and constructivistic images of God.

Power linked to powerlessness, unifying souls and making things happen

Philip's image of God is marked by the absolute transcendence of a "higher power" and "energy" which cannot be explained by man. This power does not touch him in any way. On the other hand, he expresses the closeness of this "divine force" by characterizing it as an "energy" which is present in each one of us, and to which all souls return. For Philip, this "divine energy" is both transcendent and immanent. At the same time, this energy sets off a process which works differently in each one of us and aims to "unify all souls". Philip describes this as a "spiritual base for taking action", which is present in every person and part of a stream of energy which surrounds everything and makes "things happen".

This corresponds to the "spiritual basis for taking action" which is a part of the omnipresent divine force and, simultaneously, Philip's most prominent image of God.

Banality of the 'old man' being a 'new man' through conscience

Lucia speaks of a higher power that she believes in. This "higher power" is the incorporation of the good in the universe and appears to her in the form of her conscience. This conscience has a very concrete influence on her life. Her belief in this "higher power" manifesting itself within her conscience is connected to her belief in herself and her friends.

The context of this image of God is Lucia's displeasure with the banality and uniformity of her everyday life. She is neither satisfied with the

role she takes on in school and her professional development, nor with the role she takes on at home with her family. She looks for a meaning within this dissatisfaction. She does so in the very concrete form of a conversation with her conscience, which, to her, is capable of bringing some sense and order since it is in contact with a "higher power". She does, however, assume that she is being guided onto the right paths by a higher power through her conversations with her conscience. She feels that her conscience not only gives her solace in cases of painful, personal hurt, but that it also inspires hope.

The consequence of Lucia's world view is, surprisingly, that God is "good". A person led by his or her conscience is somebody who is at peace and helping to create "heaven on Earth". This abstract image of God, the "conscience", is rendered more concrete – God's intentions for people are good.

Freedom and dependence/bondage – God and people

Lea assumes that every person has an individual "higher power" at his or her side, which protects the person in times of need. This power can be undefined, nebulous or even unreachable. Lea believes that this "higher power" is "individual" for each person and that it is a part of a greater "unity power", which she identifies with the Hindu breath of life, Karma.

The most important origin of Lea's individualistic image of God lies in her presumption of man's and God's dependence on each other. According to Lea, God exists because man is continuously creating him in thought. For man, too, however, belief is essential to life. She claims that God's death would mean the death of mankind, too, as all hope would be lost.

The figure of a "higher power" can only be identified through the ideas and pictures that arise when a person has experiences through and with it. She does, however, insist that this dependence is two-sided. Man is dependent on hope and, as such, on the higher power that gives him the hope and protection that he needs. The person creating his or her

personal image of God is not completely free and is even dependent on this image of God.

Summary of the interns' images of God – a hint towards the "new man"?

One thing is clear regarding the images of God of some of our youngsters: they seem to know the ambiguous and paradoxical structure of the believer's position between freedom and powerlessness, between power and powerlessness, and they also seem to know something about the 'old man' (banality/structures) and the 'new man' (being responsible for others, the unification of all souls). This is very important for me as a teacher and theologian: there is sense in bringing the idea of voluntary commitment into structures of education, because the consequences of the results of this study can even – and this is my hope for the coming years – change these structures' direction towards what St. Paul called the "new man".

To come back from these theological heights (or depths), the experience of the first year of our projects was as follows.

Yes, we were successful in motivating youngsters to be regularly involved in social commitment; yes, we changed a bit of our structural curriculum and still have plans to develop this; yes, we made contact with other institutions and youth clubs and fixed a link between formal and non-formal education; and finally, yes, we send 17 interns to Plzen, Prague, Belfast, Warsaw and Krakow and linked our institutional roots, but the truth is also this: the images, films and highlights of all this is one thing, but the other thing is that we still very frequently came across the "old man":

Students: "Is my engagement now sufficient?"
Teachers: "It's stressful for me to organize my lessons and the pupils so they can take part in the voluntary project."
Schools: "How can we use the output of the results of the students' work in voluntary commitment, what competences do they earn?"

Youth clubs: "This is not our idea of youth work when teachers run around in our non-formal place, this is our place."

Perhaps reflecting on the bipolar images of God can shed some light on these "old man" questions towards a more dynamic and deeper understanding of 'voluntary'.

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