Laudation (Matthias Scharer) and response to the thesis (Anja Steinberg) on the occasion of the presentation of the Science Prize to Dr Anja Steinberg on 16 May 2026 as part of the IMV

Anja Steinberg's research project as part of the TZI research programme (Matthias)

Your doctoral thesis, dear Anja, is one of 39 doctoral theses on the TZI that we found in connection with our research into the estate of Ruth C. Cohn. The geographical spread of the theses is impressive: they were written across a wide range of countries, from the USA, through Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Italy, to Croatia, India, Brazil and Cameroon. A few years ago, I visited the first doctoral candidate for whom Ruth C. Cohn had written a review, namely Evelyn Challis, near San Francisco. Ruth C. Cohn's son, Peter Ronald, lives not far from her, and I met with him as well. To be more precise, Anja Steinberg's research forms part of the group of 16 TZI-related dissertations originating from the field of theology, primarily from practical theology and religious education. Anja's research is hermeneutically oriented.

The title was already mentioned in the general overview of the submitted theses. As a reminder:
'Learning and Teaching Empathy – The Empathic Logic of Religious Educational Processes with Reference to Theme-Centred Interaction (TZI) according to Ruth C. Cohn.'
The doctoral thesis was awarded a 'magna cum laude' by the University of Heidelberg in 2023 and published in 2025. It is also available online.

As the thesis deals not only with TZI but also with empathy, I have asked you, dear Anja, to briefly introduce us to the core concept of 'empathic logic' in relation to religious educational processes. Following on from your remarks on the thesis as a whole, I shall make three comments on your interpretation of TZI. These relate specifically to the extensive fifth chapter (126 pages!), which served as the basis for our application for the TZI Academic Prize.

Anja replies:

Thank you very much indeed, dear Matthias, for your opening remarks. I shall be delighted to tell you all about my research – leaving out the TZI chapter for now. However, before I say anything about my research topic in general, first of all a huge thank you: The fact that we are here together today and that I am able to spend this day with you all in such a festive setting is, without a doubt, something very special for me and, of course, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Thank you so very much for recognising my work. I am indescribably delighted to have shared first place and would, of course, like to thank you, the selection committee, and all of you for being here today.

In particular, I'd also like to say a big thank you to you, dear Matthias, for everything. In the run-up to our gathering today, I had a look back: in June 2022, in response to a query I'd sent you regarding the content of my dissertation, you sent me an email that was really further

work on " ( ) very helpful for my . This was followed by several more emails, until we finally met in person at a TZI conference in autumn 2022.
We were then in touch again in November. That, in turn, helped me to finally complete my thesis. In that respect, it goes without saying that I mentioned you in the foreword to my book.
And how lovely it was, then, that we both met again last summer in 2025, following the publication of my thesis.

So now I'd like to give you all a little insight into the subject matter of my thesis, which I began in 2019 – incidentally, the very same year in which TZI really 'grabbed' me in a very special way; that is, after all, very telling.

My thesis begins in the introduction with Ruth Cohn and her well-known poem:
'To know that we count…' – and this isn't simply because I couldn't think of anything else for the introduction; no, it is truly absolutely indicative of the central concern and all the subsequent discussions:

'We matter', as Ruth Cohn put it:
'With our lives,
with our love,
against the cold,
for me,
for you,
for our world".

It is precisely for this reason, and based on this certainty, that my doctoral thesis explores what vibrant teaching and learning might look like in terms of empathy. An empathetic logic emerges in my work. Put quite simply, empathy is essential in interpersonal relationships. It is a topical issue in society, but it has long been recognised in pedagogy and teaching in general. In other words: every human encounter requires empathy.

What can schools – or, in the context of my thesis, religious education in particular – do to help children and young people learn empathy? How can I teach with empathy? Can empathy be learnt and taught? The answer is clear: yes! TZI makes a contribution to this, amongst other things; we will hear more about my work from Matthias Scharer later on.

A fundamentally interdisciplinary approach is very important to me when it comes to the logic of empathy.
I have reviewed the current state of research in the field of religious education through two works: I refer to Herbert Stettberger's 'Empathetic Bible Didactics' and also to ' ' on the approach of Elisabeth Naurath (who, incidentally, teaches here at the University of Augsburg) with her focus on violence prevention and emotional learning.

My search for the logic of empathy – even though I have primarily anchored it within the field of religious education in my doctoral thesis – involves a holistic approach. It concerns

the whole person and also humanity as a whole. I therefore draw on neurobiological, sociological and psychological assumptions in my work.

Theologically, I have adopted both an exegetical and a systematic approach.
From an anthropological perspective, three approaches are examined: vulnerability, particularly following Heike Springhart; what Gregor Etzelmüller terms 'inter-corporeality'; and, last but not least, fragmentarity, to which I refer in relation to Henning Luther's foundational work.

My approach and the search for empathic logic also incorporate the perspective of pastoral care. In this regard, I have drawn particularly on Dietrich Stollberg's approach to perception – both inward and outward. The significance of 'perceiving and accepting' is explored in relation to learning empathy.
Alongside the academic rigour, I have also repeatedly sought to include so-called 'reading guides' in the biblical section of the thesis.

In some places, I have therefore included brief practical examples drawn from my own everyday school life. I am firmly convinced that TZI has transformed my own teaching and continues to shape it.

In the final chapter, the concept of empathy is also reflected upon in the context of Non-Violent Communication. Finally, the ideas of Hartmut Rosa and Wolfgang Endres on resonance pedagogy are taken up, and the question of the 'semi-availability' of education is addressed. I am very grateful to Ingrid Schoberth for preparing the initial review and supervising my thesis. She gave plenty of scope to my own ideas regarding the genesis of the work, including those relating to TZI.

To conclude this brief overview – in which I have, of course, been unable to summarise 414 pages of the book for you all – I would like to return once more to TZI. Although I do not yet know what you, dear Matthias, are about to tell us, I would simply like to raise one point from my own perspective:
Namely the question: What is it about my thesis that is closest to my heart?
It is very difficult to say that any single idea is the most important to me, but the fact that, within the field of religious education, there are multi-perspective spaces of possibility for learning empathy is an overarching conclusion of my work. As the TZI is never merely a simple method, but always also a fundamental attitude, I can only say: with the TZI, empathy can be learnt and taught.

How wonderful that TZI provides us with opportunities and horizons of possibility for empathetic coexistence in our teaching, our learning and our whole lives.

Thank you once again for the award.

Three comments on Anja Steinberg's chapter on TZI (Matthias)

1. On the (excessive) complexity of the TZI presentation

Dear Anja, as has already been noted in the academic reviews of your doctoral thesis, you do not always make it easy for readers to keep track of the complexity of your TZI approach. The references you cite in the 1,959 footnotes in your thesis – some of which you comment on at length – testify to your comprehensive knowledge of the literature. A glance at the table of contents of your thesis is enough to give an idea of just how complex Ruth Cohn's approach has actually become as it has developed over the last 80 years.

Your treatment of TZI stands out refreshingly from the oversimplified representations of the approach which, despite extensive research, we still find in TZI leaflets, on websites and presumably also in TZI training programmes. Anyone interested in 'Living Learning' according to Ruth C. Cohn – and, above all, anyone conducting further research into this approach – will find your comprehensive account of TZI indispensable in future.

2. On the (refreshingly) integrative perspective on the WILL Approach

The TZI chapter is entitled: 'Living Teaching and Learning' in Theme-Centred Interaction (TZI) according to Ruth C. Cohn. By using the term 'Living Learning', you are drawing on Norman Liberman's suggestion as to how to describe what Ruth Charlotte Cohn 'discovered' during a long journey of learning – from the psychoanalytic couch, through her encounters with various forms of group therapy, to her ultimate aim: a form of social therapy grounded in philosophy and transcendental principles. 'Will-Approach', within the framework of which 'Living Learning' was explored, developed and practised, was Ruth's favourite term for her approach in her English texts. As is well known, she repeatedly expressed reservations about the 'Theme-centred Interactional Method' (TIM) – as it was originally called. First of all, she removed the word 'method', because it obscured rather than illuminated the inseparability of the philosophical, ethical, transcendental-spiritual and political outlook for which Ruth had discovered Living Learning. However, the problem was not resolved by removing the word 'method'; rather, it persists to this day in the ' ' discourse on 'attitude' and 'method' within TZI; whilst their integration is frequently invoked, the two perspectives are still distinguished right down to the training curriculum.

I consider it a substantial step forward from what has been said that, following your description of the 'Four-Factor Model as the basis of the holistic learning process' and the 'TZI axioms', as well as the presentation of the postulates, you have prefaced a 'contextual classification of TZI' under the heading 'Knowing that we matter' with a 'contextualisation of TZI through the biography of Ruth C. Cohn'; furthermore, in line with Ruth C. Cohn's original conception, you closely link the description of the TZI factors with the TZI axioms and the postulates. By discovering an empathetic logic within the TZI factors and in the understanding of TZI's themes, which leads you to the 'visionary moment of TZI', you expand the integrative understanding of the four-factor model.

3. (and final) note on the theological, spiritual and pastoral positioning of religious education within a 'relationship-based didactics'

Your research, dear Anja, is not concerned with 'empathic logic' and TZI 'in itself', but with its place within the field of religious education. As far as I can recall from discussions in your subject – which was also mine – the question of what religion is actually supposed to achieve in a liberal society, specifically in the form of religious education (RU) in state schools underpinned by democratic consensus, is hotly contested. Should it not be replaced by general ethics lessons or by 'religious studies', in which all pupils – regardless of their affiliation to state-recognised religious communities – can take part?

By framing religious education – motivated by empathetic, dynamic learning – as 'relationship-based learning' closely aligned with 'theme-centred pastoral care', dear Anja, you raise not only questions regarding its didactic foundations but also those concerning the theological justification for such 'relationship-based learning', and with it the 'crucial question' for TZI: 'What's your take on religion?' Helmut Reiser regarded the questions of religion and politics as the two unresolved issues in TZI. You are concerned with both.

Given that, particularly in theology and religious education, there is now a comprehensive reception of TZI within 'communicative theology' – a field in which I am not entirely uninvolved – a further line of discourse opened up for your research project, which you have addressed consistently and constructively and presented comprehensively.

Outlook

For me personally, my in-depth engagement with Ruth C. Cohn's 'eco-spiritual' vision – within the framework of her paradigm of the interconnectedness of all living things – has led me to ask new questions, particularly in light of my reading of Indian women writers, which might point to a 'mystical' or 'enlightened' state in Ruth C. Cohn. I see in you a competent discussion partner for theological and religious education questions relating to 'Living Learning' that have not yet been fully explored. By referring the 'approach to 'the joy of ambiguity' and 'a sense of possibility' in the context of , an incalculable range of ideological perspectives opens up in a 'multi-religious' and 'ideologically diverse' world – one that is increasingly reflected in school classes, amongst other places. In her poem 'God who is not', which, for Ruth C. Cohn, roughly coincides with the discovery of 'Living Learning', she poetically opens up a wealth of possibilities for coming into contact with the 'transcendent'. This is already evident in the very first stanza of the poem:

> God who is not –
> Tell me – since you are not –
> What shall I do with the ribbon-wrapped thank you in my hands
> Where shall I lay it down?[1]

Your research into empathy and 'Living Learning' within the context of religious educational processes broadens the theoretical and practical horizons within which we engage with TZI. I am delighted to present you with this book, containing Ruth's poem and an exploration of her eco-spiritual 'vision', on this joyful and honourable occasion.

[1] Amat Eve, alias Ruth C. Cohn, *God who is not*, 1962, HU UA, NL Cohn, No. 260d, p. 44, in: Scharer, M. and M. (2025): *All-Connected in a Planetary Future*. Ruth C. Cohn's eco-spiritual 'vision' today, pp. 228ff.