

Introduction

Education is an act of faith: an act of believing in the future. Whoever undertakes the task of caring for children and youngsters is showing a boundless faith in what is yet to come. In caring for children one gives attention to the awakening possibilities that are in full development. One imagines the invisible, based on the assumption that all will be well for this particular child, this particular youngster. There is a future for this child's unique life-destination. The fruits of this development are ripening, silently, but irreversibly. Education is an act of faith: one gives his best to something that is bigger than oneself and bigger than the best of oneself. In the act of educating giving is receiving, to act is to set children free. In education the ultimate paradox of what it means to be human comes powerful to the fore: to live life to the fullest is to set free.

This book about religious education is anchored in this feeling of boundless faith. It aspires to be a 'literacy of hope' (in German: *Alphabetisierung der Hoffnung*, see Balderman 1996, 15-23) written on every day's lifelines and points to the direction in which that life reproduces new life when one sets children free. This book aims to give insight in the learning processes that take place between the generations when people show each other their most intimate 'burning inside', namely that of faith. Religious education does not differ from general education. In everyday education children's questions are taken seriously by means of undertaking the task of beginning to formulate an answer together. The educator is attempting to do so in a conscientious manner, trying to keep as much as possible in agreement with the norms and values as he has planned. By attempting to formulate an answer, the question itself gets perpetuity value. The question has been heard, the child has been seen and the world is becoming a better place. Strictly taken one does not need religious faith when educating children. Just a good amount of common sense suf-

fices. The opposite is true though: to educate children ‘in faith’ one has to have faith in education.

Project developer or hope generator?

In education nowadays the question is often heard whether or not there is an alternative for the human being as a ‘project-developer’. Children and youngsters obviously can not be brought under in projects. They are not moldable, adaptable and cannot be domesticated (in the double meaning of to tame and to bring at ease). They are uncompromisingly themselves, on their way to full maturity, to the fulfillment of their own life destination. In their protest, cry for attention, longing for protection and in the provocative question ‘is this the future yet?’ lies the denial of the ideal of feasibility of our days. In each and every child the future presents itself in a surprising and unique manner. That is a fact that no one, not even the best equipped and most professional educator, can undo or manipulate. In these late modern times, where the big inspiring stories about education have disappeared, one is confronted in a completely new way with the irreducible uniqueness of children and youngsters. Never before the ‘big questions’ about the meaning of life have been so eminent as today, and never before the need for ‘worthy dreams’ was felt so explicitly as in our days (Daloz Parks 2000). The need for an honest and powerful handling with of fragility is not met anymore with the old religious or humanistic answers, inasmuch as they are occupied with their own institutional self-preservation.

The first goal of this book is to give religious educators a pat on the back, as to enable them to do their jobs with truthfulness and inspired professionalism, whether they are school teachers, parish catechists or religious educators in the congregation, youth ministers, religious counselors or parents. The big challenge for education lies in the designing of a new and liberating perspective on being human, together with actual children and youngsters, in order to generate hope for the

future of this world. Educators who set themselves the task of teaching morality and spirituality to future adults are called upon to fulfill the role of 'hope generator'. In my perspective this is needed now more than ever. In my 1994 dissertation I described our era as experiencing a 'call for education', an era in which people are more conscious of their task to help young people to be truly human and to support them with counter pressure and ideals (Roebben 1995a). Today, fourteen years later, I dare to speak of a time which is ready to take up the dialogue with the big religious movements of our culture. The pedagogical question has become a theological one. Perhaps, the hope which our day and age so desperately longs for can be enhanced by this dialogue. At least on the condition that educators learn to set children and youngsters free in their religious education ...

Which expertise is needed for this cultural turnaround? Undoubtedly domain specific knowledge on the terrain of ethics and religion. Undoubtedly didactical skills to explain things clearly. Undoubtedly communicative competencies to stimulate the dialogue between young people with each other and internally as well. But what is needed the most is pedagogical concern, the willingness to be interested in them and to be among them (in Latin: *inter-esse*), in the 'in between' of youth and culture, of past and future, of already and not yet, of experience and revelation. The generator of hope is a person with a soul in his body. Someone who knows what it means to go through life being a moral and/or religious person. Someone who dares to wrestle with the complexity of modern existence, who lets his own values, norms and meanings be challenged by everyday life, who brings his own spiritual sources in movement, enabling them to endure this quest and give it meaning. Such a person is truly inspired. Hopeful education brings this inspiration and care for the concrete quest of (young) people permanently under attention. Their little stories are given space in order to be seen and told in relation to the big movements of our culture that are happening in depth (historical), in breadth (socially) and in the distance (with respect to the wellbeing of future generations). In

hopeful education everything is kept together, not torn apart. Life stories and story traditions can of course fall to pieces on the floor, but in modern and hopeful education one is able to pick up the pieces and go on. According to Herman Servotte, who during his lifetime as priest-professor was an intellectual inspirator to many young people in Leuven (Belgium), this is the characteristic of the moderns: they keep having faith that one can pick up the pieces and that they even can be bound together into new syntheses. Post-modernists have decided for themselves not to pick up the pieces any more, let alone bind them together. Education in a modern and hopeful (religious) teaching perspective invites the youth to learn to formulate and experience a holistic view on life, to bind themselves with and to each other.

Vision and discernment

The educator of the future is fascinated by a vision for which he wants to be held responsible. He has heard the calling for life enrichment that arises out of the belly of society and more particular out of the lives of youngsters. He does not speak, nor act, on his own accord, but entrusts himself to the ultimate meaningfulness of this magnificent 'young' reality that surrounds him. He sees the desire of young people to be of worth. He senses their creativity and lets this come to light. He recognizes their impatience and understands their outcry for attention. All this is experiential knowledge to him. Without this vision he feels empty and meaningless. Whenever a society as a whole decides not to see and articulate the vision of hope expressed in their children, the youth starts to run wild (freely translated from *Proverbs* 29:18). The modern West-European society is well on its way realizing this: the outcry of the youth for ideals is not heard anymore, the call for inspiration is nipped in the bud. Can we then really be surprised that some youngsters indulge in excessive violence, brought upon themselves and others – in an attempt to be seen or heard?

Religious education can play a meaningful part in invoking the vision and the experiential learning of the practice of discernment, because it hands over a destination for the thinking and acting of the learner. As previously stated, religion teaches one to look at reality from an alternative perspective, not for the gain of oneself, but from the view of the other. Religion de-centers, it points away from the narrow-mindedness of the own truth, to a direction of broader orientations. Religion sensitizes for the non-constructible, indefinable, unforeseeable in the course of a person's life, which transcends humanity. Especially in the experience of transcendence new life is possible – fresh, authentic and completely immanent new life. Whoever has been introduced to that vision is challenged to educate in a completely new way and is able to distinguish what is important in everyday education.

In the splendid novel *The gift of Asher Lev* by Chaim Potok (2004) the main character struggles with his place in creation. He experiences the vocation to develop his qualities as an artist no longer to be in conflict with the strict religious community in New York City to which he belongs, but in accordance with it and with respect to the artistic shine of it. This is an enormous stretch from the conflict of the early years of his career as an artist, when he, because of his offensive religious paintings, was banned from the same community. This ban is described in the earlier novel by Potok, *My name is Asher Lev* (1995).

Asher Lev realizes that he has been fighting for the ideals of his youth and that his vocation slowly but surely gained its place in his own religious community. He stays at a safe but rewarding distance. In the second novel he finds himself for the choice: can he be open to the future of his children that choose to live again in the community of New York or does he act in the same excluding manner as his parents did? This is a dilemma he is constantly struggling with and he is summoned regularly by the Rabbi to exchange views on that matter. In one of the conversations the Rabbi shares with him an idea that beautifully demonstrates what I mean with vision and ability to dis-

cern. According to the Rabbi, the spiritual leader as well as the artist, participate in that vision. They are not opponents of each other, but are able to express, each in their own way, the dynamics of a society and the call to act. In a fundamental way it all boils down to the ability to see in a new way: not with eyes that only see the temporary, but from a holistic perspective. Not with eyes that only see the fragmented, but out of a perspective of wholeness and salvation. “The human person sees only between the moments he shuts his eyes. He doesn’t know how the world is during the moments he has his eyes closed. He can only see the world in parts, in fragments. But the Master of the Universe can see the world as a whole, not crumbled. That world is good. Our way of seeing is crumbled, Asher Lev. Can we make that as the seeing of God? Would that be possible?” (Potok 2004, 149 – translation BR).

This new way of seeing, this new vision, lies at the root of the vision of a modern way of educating. It releases energy for enhancing a sharper sight, for the ability to discern, for inspiration – to do the thing that must be done today. Whoever had such an experience is not able to keep silent about it. To see and to inspire – care and encouragement – are the two big stimulants of education in general and religious education in particular. They are the starting point of this book.

Longing and perspective

In this book I work with a ‘narthical model’ of religious communication and education (see especially Chapter 5). With this I mean the following. In order to see more clearly one’s life destination, the religious educator leads the young person on a quest within the narthex, the passageway between outside and inside, between already and not yet, between longing and perspective. Narthex literally means: the entrance of a church building. In this book narthex is used metaphorically: as an image for the religious learning process. The student experiences himself as being on his way in his own existence, longing

for life fulfillment. By being initiated in the narthical space, he can catch his breath, as to, precisely in that moment of inner peace, be confronted with stories from 'elsewhere' which shed a new light on that longing. This new light is a pedagogical light (images and stories that enable me to renew my own narrative identity), but also a theological light (images and stories that remind me of the carrying ground of my existence). The narthex is not meant as a stepping stone as to be lured into the Christian experience which is reserved for the *intimi* of the inner circle. The narthex is a space for anyone who is tempted to give his own life (temporarily) out of hands, to look at it from a completely different perspective and who is willing to be spoken to by something completely new. The latter is never alienating: it requires a minimum of recognizability, of awareness that what is shown is strange and provocatively new.

I thus use a *thick description* of religious communication and education. This is more than a 'bloodless' informative and communicative circle of knowledge and insight about a certain religious theme. It not only shows the way in which people in cultures and traditions deal with the religious and how the student can use this opportunity as a 'religious tourist' to build his own religious identity. It challenges the student to become a 'pilgrim', to be touched deep within and become reborn as a new person who resources himself in the dynamics of life of immanence and transcendence. The person on the quest can decide to go on based on his own strength, not caring about an *ultimate concern*. But he cannot withdraw himself of the 'lingering questions' which are placed upon him by life itself, when he is led into the narthex and is persuaded to contemplate about that existence. My approach with regard to religious communication and education is an attempt to offer *soul food*. To a person who is hungry one does not explain how the digestive tract works (*Den religiösen Hunger stillen* 1998).

Whoever undertakes this learning process is becoming vulnerable and remains somewhat distant to *instant* religious education which collects *fast food* answers and represents the idea that one can be religiously *self made*. Narthical religious education takes the person on the quest seriously in his unfulfilled longing and the awareness of the limitations of his own fulfillment, helps that person in formulating lingering questions and leaves space for 'living in dedication', for temporality and not-knowing. And precisely there a new light can come into existence, a new destination for his own life story. Then the person on the quest realizes: 'I have been seen already, I don't have to attempt being noticed. I am grounded already, I don't have to ground myself. In my quest I have already been found. And when I fall, I will never fall into ultimate meaninglessness'. *Faith* occurs here: belief, devotion, trust. This differs completely from *submission*: humiliation, subjection, self-denial. There are many forms of religious communication that do not end up with 'faith'. Under the cloak of being visionary they do injustice to the vision, because they split up the seer of his ability to discern critically what needs to be done in the holy space of *his* life.

Cities and theologians

The post-modern city forms the broader context for these reflections. In this book, meant to be a practical-theological re-imagining of the work of the religious educator, the city is the *root metaphor* for a post-modern society on the move. The city is symbolizing the complexity and plurality of organizational principles of contemporaries to live a meaningful and happy life. It is also symbolizing the clashes in this process of meaning giving. People can fundamentally agree but also disagree with one another in their search for a meaningful sense of direction. They can stand in the way of the other: morally and religiously. In a globalizing society the perspectives of promise and brokenness, hope for fulfillment and despair, are eminently present in daily life. The critical theologian who is present in society, is aware of these situations, is able to make them explicit and to formulate learn-

ing perspectives, relying on his knowledge, wisdom and engagement in a religious tradition of hope. He is legitimating his position by using a theological frame of reference that is anchored in his own critically interpreted religious experience.

The culture of young people, radically rooted in the experience of real and virtual cities, open for renewal and new horizons, is a challenge to modern theology to reframe its knowledge of, wisdom about and engagement with the living God. In line with this argument I will address in this book partly the issue of theological education in seminaries and university departments of theology (see Chapters 8 and 12). Three central goals should be on the agenda of a contextualized theological education: a) to enter in hopeful dialogues with the emerging issues and shifting grounds on which contemporaries are working, living and loving; b) to be proactive in theological reflection and in asking questions such as ‘what are the theological criteria for assessing new experiences, new ideas and fragments of tradition-in-the-making?’ ‘What is the frame of reference for reading the signs of the times?’; and c) to take part in actual disclosing practices in our society. European developments and scholarly discussions in religious education praxis, theory and research form the greater part of this book. It was my explicit intention to make the different voices of European research in religious education (in Dutch, English, French and German) accessible to the English speaking world. Standing on the crossroads of cities and contexts, listening to the multi-lingual voices and vibes, I consider this book to be a modest mirror of what is going on in the *kosmopolis* Europe, this ‘minimum space with its maximum diversity’ (Kundera 2007, 28) of (religious-educational) ideas and practices.

Summary and acknowledgments

This book contains twelve chapters, grouped in three sections: a) education, religion and values; b) education, religion and school; c) edu-

cation, religion and the city. The first part brings together basic elements for a contemporary discussion on education, morality and religion in a post-modern culture. The first two chapters deal with a comprehensive view on moral education. Through a historical and systematic lens the need for moral authenticity and creativity in contemporary education and society is described and evaluated. Human dignity is in this respect not only the goal of moral education, but also its central value and virtue. The quest for human dignity in society and the relationship with the warm spiritual undercurrent in that same society, urge us to speak of moral education as cultivating 'responsible imagination'. The third chapter deals with the dynamics of religion in the public sphere, with its individualized quests for meaning and with the idea of 'kairos' (Greek for the good moment) to respond to this situation with the rich legacy of churches and religious communities. In the fourth chapter I explore the ways in which the pedagogical justification of (young) parents in daily education can also be theologically carried through, precisely by rethinking and experiencing those pedagogical skills in their vulnerable heart.

In the second part the emphasis lies on religious education in schools. This learning area I take pre-eminently as a quest. Youngsters are taken by the hand in an attempt to 'discover' meaning in their own life and the lives that surround them. They are confronted with insights that are not theirs, but which can be an inspiration to 're-define and re-dignify' themselves and their environment in a completely new way. The 'narthical' learning model (Chapter 5) connects to this perspective of going on a quest in religious education. The ability to critically enter into 'detours' sharpens the openness for the unexpected, the surprising, for the meaning that does not disclose itself automatically. Inter-religious learning seems to be the most appropriate model for the subject of religious education in the modern West-European secondary school, according to Chapter 6. Youngsters learn to document different religious beliefs and to communicate with people about these differences, often concretely present in their classmates. I describe the

recent developments of this approach, but also take it a step further. Whoever lets himself be touched by the otherness of the other in the classroom cannot remain unaffected and has to be able to formulate the beginning of a religious position by him self. My estimate is that young people, because of their religious frankness, are capable of the inter-spiritual meeting with the other. Good education stimulates this possibility. In Chapter 7, I take the view that there is a positive attitude among youngsters to quench themselves at the great stories. The Bible is a book that can stimulate and uncover the narrative identity of the youth, on the terms that the religious educators are willing to give testimony of the struggle that this invokes in them selves. Chapter 8 is an attempt to reframe the theological preparation of future teachers of Roman-Catholic religious education within the boundaries of canon law at the one hand and practical 'culture theology' at the other hand.

The final part of the book is focusing on religious communication with young people outside the school, in the broader context of the city, as a metaphor for growing urbanization, globalization and (moral and religious) diversification. In Chapter 9 an exploration of different approaches to youth ministry is undertaken, in the context of ongoing globalization. In Chapter 10 a comprehensive model for ministry with youth and young adults is developed, in which seeing, judging and acting are complemented by dreaming and remembering (in line with White 2005). Youth theology evolving out of this ministry is a strong reminder to academic theologies to remain life-related and rooted in actual religious practices. The final chapter underlines this idea by reporting on a concrete experience with young adults during two summer camps. The lived theology that I could discover there mirrors the idea that solidarity with human beings is risky and that Gods unconditional love comes to us as 'risky revelation', in the vulnerable heart of people who are careful and considerate.

Most of the chapters in this book have been previously published as articles (see the list of acknowledgments at the end), but have been

adjusted to the overall perspective of the book. The narthical approach has played a big part in this, by which I want to show that religious education and youth ministry have been revitalized by the concept of religious experience. I describe and empower this tendency and reinterpret recent developments within this framework. As such this collection reflects the contemplative process that has occurred in the author as well.

Retrospective and vision

This book offers the reader a retrospective on fifteen years of postdoctoral work in the field of religious education. Since the defense of my thesis, *Een tijd van opvoeden. Moraalpedagogiek in christelijk perspectief* [A time to educate. Moral education in Christian perspective] at the faculty of theology of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium) on the 21st of June 1994 (for the published edition, see Roebben 1995a), and during my teaching and research in Leuven, Tilburg (the Netherlands) and Dortmund (Germany), I focused mainly on the study of religious education in and out of schools. The theological considerations gained more and more the upper hand in spite of the pedagogical, didactical and social theoretical ones. Nowadays I dare say that religious education in theory, research and praxis, has realized the interests of recent didactical developments. Numerous insights from the ‘new learning movement’ have been integrated. Mainly the theologians have been the first to implement these new perspectives on their own didactics. It goes without saying that a lot of work remains to be done in this field. But I have the strong impression that out of the grassroots of religious education and resulting from the theoretical reflection on this subject, a new language game announces itself, a language game that is more theological in its nature.

People in the workplace are eager to know ‘what’ they will tell the youth, not so much ‘how’ they will tell this – which didactics or methods they need to do this. They mainly ask themselves ‘why’ they

tell the things they tell, from which principles and stories these things originate, and if they are authentic and future-able. It is my solemn conviction that the future wellbeing of the youth in a globalizing society should be the centre of interpretation for these origins. Whoever did not envision this clearly, will not be heard by youngsters because he is considered as someone who has nothing meaningful to say. The implications of this perspective on (religious) education for theology, for the systematic reflection on the origins of faith, are immense. Tradition is the ongoing process of resourcement of a religious community that wants to be transparent on behalf of the future of next generations. In this process I would like to invite my readers. This book is meant for the study and reflection in higher education, in the training of religious educators, catechists or pastoral ministers, at universities, institutes of higher education and seminaries, but it can also be used in the living room, at school, or in a parish or congregation by people who want to know more about religious education in changing contexts.

A warm word of thank-you is appropriate here, to all my students and colleagues in Leuven, Antwerpen, Utrecht, Pittsburgh, Stellenbosch, Tilburg and Dortmund, for their critical voices and helpful insights in the reflective process that gave birth to the chapters of this book. Moreover, I had the chance to meet with great people on the road, during the conferences of the 'Religious Education Association' in the United States (REA), the 'Co-ordinating Group for Religion in Education in Europe' (CoGREE), the 'European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education' (EFTRE), the Dutch Association for the study of religious education (NGPG), the 'International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry' (IASYM), and during the workshops of the Council of Europe in Georgia, the Russian Federation and Ukraine. I have learned so much about the common and global questions to religious education and youth work, precisely by getting involved in the very local and particular answers to these questions. I am particularly grateful to Andrea van Dijk and Eveline van der Ham (Tilburg Uni-

versity) and to Kim de Wildt (Dortmund University) for their enormous help with editing the text. I acknowledge with appreciation my Protestant colleagues Gerhard Büttner and Thomas Pola for allowing me to publish this book in the 'Dortmunder Beiträge zu Theologie und Religionspädagogik' and Dr. Michael J. Rainer of Lit-Verlag in Münster.

One image is particularly inspiring for my work as a religious education scholar and teacher. It is called the 'Sternenweg', the way of the stars, a forty meter long piece of art made of steel and stone, erected at the French banks of the Rhine in Neuf-Brisach, at the level of the German town of Breisach. Here the Black Forest and the Elzas meet each other. The artist Helmut Lutz (° Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1941) designed this piece of art with the intention that it functions as a stage of communication for people who cross natural and spiritual boundaries and want to communicate with each other on this subject. The colossus has traveled along the great rivers of Europe and has been exposed in Rome, Santiago de Compostela and Jerusalem. In the summer of 2006 it was erected in Sarajevo where it served as a stage for a contemporary mystery play (www.sternenweg.de).

When one looks closer to this picture three elements come to the fore: the 'Sternenweg', the Rhine and the Roman church, the *Sankt Stephansmünster*, highly elevated above Breisach, at the other side of the river. They represent respectively dialogue, border and perspective. Upon visiting this site in 2003 the interplay of these elements inspired me to reflect on religious education. Whoever wants to educate young people spiritually makes them aware of the borders of life and opposite side of the narrow-mindedness of the own truth. In doing so he shows perspectives and panoramas in all their diversity. Without the specification in a concrete tradition one cannot speak of religious experience or religious education. Therefore he needs the vivid connection to a spiritual tradition, a church, a community, etc. And last but not least he offers a communicative stage where people exchange

what they have seen and heard – where they learn in the presence of the other. The teacher thus encourages the dialogue on what is ultimately unspeakable but real. The image with the three elements is covered up in a haze of rhyme. Silence has descended on the borderland of the Rhine. Religious education can ultimately not realize its own goal. Only silence remains.

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