CULTURE AND TRADITION: TWO CONTESTED CONCEPTS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Siebren Miedema* and Bert H.M.Roebben**

*VU University Amsterdam
** University of Dortmund

ABSTRACT

In our contribution a non-essentialist concept of culture is outlined in which continuity and change both have their legitimate place. This is combined with the notion of 'schemata repertoire' that can highlight the externalizing, objectifying and internalizing dimensions of culture, and which immediately points to intercultural aspects of religious education. Then follows the question what this view on culture implies for the concept of tradition? The fruitfulness of our approach is exemplary shown with a report on a summer camp with young adults. Finally the relationship between culture and tradition is dealt with along a Peircean, abductive line of interpretation as another way of conceptualization.

THE SCHEMATA REPERTOIRE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

According to the Dutch religious anthropologist André Droogers (2001), the very concept of culture can ontologically and epistemologically be dealt with in an essentialist and a non-essentialist way. Roughly speaking this means that in the first paradigm culture is the more or less closed ensemble of customs and habits. In the second paradigm, on the other hand, culture is conceptualized as the general dynamic human potential of meaning giving to the experienced reality and embodies both change and continuity.

Droogers is inspired by and is following here the train of thought of Berger and Luckmann in their already seminal work in the field of sociology of knowledge, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966/1972), and characterizes culture as 'construction of reality'. The implication is that i) culture is made by humankind, ii) but is also an entity *sui generis*, and iii) that culture shapes humankind and determines it. In this description culture seemingly contains contradictory elements, because humankind externalises, objectifies and internalizes culture. Externalizing and internalizing persons

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are active in processes that take place in culture. On the other hand does objectified culture represent order and system which on their turn influence individuals. Both continuity and change have its legitimate place in this conceptualization of the concept of culture.

Using the term *'schemata repertoire'* in relationship with the second concept of culture, Droogers is trying to make us sensitive for the dynamics of partial and even inconsistent applications of culture by individuals. What does he precisely mean by this notion of 'schemata repertoire'? He borrows the concept of 'schema' from the field of cognitive anthropology and describes it as a minimal script, scenario, model or prototype for a certain idea, emotion or action. Schemata such as writing a conference paper, to go on holidays, entail minimal characteristics and are therefore optimally applicable and flexible. Schemata can be located on a macro, meso or micro level, and several and different schemata may be used at the same time. With the notion 'repertoire' he points to a) the more or less systematic cultural knowledge that people embody but this embodied knowledge is not always factually actualized, b) to the fact that a repertoire is not fixed but may change, becomes smaller or larger, and c) shows that there is a plurality of repertoires which are not necessary consistent with each other.

Combining the concepts of schemata and repertoire to 'schemata repertoire', he defines *'culture' (single)* as *the human ability to design and control such schemata repertoires*. Or to put it in terms of Berger and Luckmann, culture is the ability to externalize (that is development and try-out of new schemata), to objectify (that is the process in which schemata live their own autonomous and flexible life) and to internalize schemata (via education, upbringing and schooling and via the media) repertoires from different origins. *'Cultures' (plural)* on the other hand *form the entirety of schemata repertoires resulting from the application of precisely this human ability*. So, it becomes clear that the reproduction of culture is a dynamic process, and that cultural change can not take place without continuity. Both centripetal (falling back in old habits and customs) and centrifugal (due to dramatic experiences, events and emotions, but also due to very authentic ways of filling in a schema so that hardly nothing is shared with other persons) forces are at stake. Strong centrifugal effects – especially in highly complex societies - can cause severe intergenerational gaps as can be noticed in the domain of religious identity articulation between older and younger generations.

Instead of expecting that a particular person as a 'carrier of culture' is showing the totality or universality of a culture, one can broadly pay attention, with the help of the concept of schemata repertoire, to the dynamics in the usage of culture by a person, an individual in terms of partiality and even inconsistency. Where cultures are seen as perforated due to modernization and globalization - and that's why as externally influenced

- and schemata as fed by communication, intercultural aspects immediately come to the fore.

TWO CONCEPTS OF (RELIGIOUS) TRADITION

Culture is in itself an act of meaning giving. With Clifford Geertz we can summarise the second concept of 'culture-in-the-making' – the *ability* to handle schemata repertoires as follows: "Believing (…) that man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretative one in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973, 4-5).

What now is the relationship between culture and religious tradition? Are religious traditions (plural) sets of (externalized and objectified) cultural repertoires that can be used for the creation of a personal (internalized) religious identity? Can and should traditions be used for that purpose? Or should tradition genuinely be understood as culture in its singular sense: as the ability to design and to control such schemata repertoires? Or in a conceptual analysis: is religious tradition to be subsumed under the first paradigm of culture (i.e. freely applicable customs and habits) or should religious tradition be understood as equivalent to the concept of culture with its twofold (i.e. essentialist and non-essentialist) interpretation: as a fixed 'body' of cultural 'artefacts' or as the (always provisional) ongoing act of culture-in-the-making? In German this duality is reflected in the language: the noun 'Tradition' (the *content* of what is handed over) is static, the verb 'Tradieren' (the *process* of handing over) is dynamic. Schematically this duality can be visualised as follows:

Static cultural concept of 'tradition'	Dynamic cultural concept of 'tradition'
Depositum fidei (deposit of faith)	*Traditio animata* (living tradition)
Transmission	Transformation
Official and isolated	Organic and rooted
Hierarchic	Participative
Elite	Democratic
Intellectualistic	Hermeneutic (experience and interpretation) ("learning by doing")
Deductive	Inductive/Abductive

It would be an interesting study to investigate how this dynamic concept of tradition has been (re-)discovered in the theological reflection of the past decades and what role was played by RE practitioners and theorists in this

development. A common determinant both in the USA and in Europe, both in the Protestant and the Roman-Catholic world, is at least the idea that the religious 'tradere' (the Latin verb used for active and dynamic handing over; the Greek equivalent is 'paradidonai', the German is, as mentioned, 'Tradieren') is synonymous to the very act of 'education'. It would be interesting to see how in the Roman-Catholic theology this idea was picked up again from traditional theology in the work of Y.-M. Congar (1960-1963) and was put into use during the Second Vatican Council and in the 'culture theology' stream in the aftermath. In the same line one could explore the complex presuppositions in the North-American debate between liberal and neo-conservative theologians and religious educationalists in the 40's and 50's (Elliott, 1940; Sherrill, 1955; for a critical overview Osmer-Schweitzer 2004, 75-168).

LEARNING TRADITION BY DOING TRADITION

In order to make the concepts of culture and tradition more concrete we report about a summer camp in which one of us took part as 'participatory action researcher' (Roebben, 2004, 337-339). The theme of the four day workshop was: 'At home on the road: coming home in your own life story'. Fourteen young adults between nineteen and twenty five years old attended the workshop. The summer camp was organised by the Youth Ministry section of the Flemish diocese of Vlaams-Brabant and Mechelen. Most of the participants are not regular churchgoers. Most of them will not even consider themselves believers, let alone Christian believers. They experience a deep longing in their lives, when they are confronted with issues such as future, despair, loneliness, vocation, life style, relationships, etc. The astonishing thing is that they are accessible for images and stories of the good life – even for biblical language games – if they are related to these 'movements of the soul' – to their marginal experiences of hunger for orientation and meaning.

Together with the youth minister I invited the participants directly to jump into the water and to swim without reserve. As leaders of the group we brought in our own narrative struggles with the ultimate ground of our lives. We gave them permanently the chance to interfere with our words and gestures, prayers and rituals, by using challenging discourse and play techniques. And we gave them ample opportunity to discuss their thoughts with their fellow human beings 'at home on the road'. In the coming section I will tell the story of the summer camp.

The key word was journey. The four days were build around four basic elements in the life of the pilgrim: stone, rope, angel and

walking-stick. The first day was organised as a long journey through the woods and the fields in the South of Leuven. The participants went two by two and were asked to reflect upon key stones of change and continuity in their lives. After lunch we stopped talking and every participant was invited to write down some ideas on these milestones in a sort of spiritual diary. We continued and arrived in one of the small Roman churches in the area (namely Tourinnes-la-Grosse), where we invited the participants to search for shelter and fresh air, and to flee for a moment from the heat outside. In the tower there was an inscription, almost saying this: 'Let your life speak' (Palmer 2000), take your time to reflect and to reshape your journey, and be confident that this is a valuable place to do so. We continued our trip and arrived finally in the middle of the fields, in a small chapel. On that spot every one was asked to write a letter to oneself, on possible inspirational key stones or embarrassing stones in the own journey. These letters were posted and arrived a couple of days later at the summer camp. At the end of the first day a spontaneous conversation about God started in the group. Most of the members said they felt connected in friendship with each other and in this coherence there was a deep spiritual embeddedness. But most of them refused to name this experience 'God' because this concept referred too much to an objective otherness, outside the real experience of human interconnectedness and solidarity.

The second day we organised a sort of labyrinth walk through the cellars of the old school building in which we were housed. After an introduction with a text of the medieval mysticist Jan van Ruusbroec on 'emptying oneself to encounter the other as a new self' the participants went two by two in the dark, using the rope of Ariadne, in order to unveil their past experiences of despair and fear – and to connect to new ways of coping with them. This was a remarkable experience for most of the participants. For moments of self-awareness of one's own shadows in life can be very confronting and discomforting – and therefore the reliance on the walking partner is a thoughtful and overwhelming experience. Afterwards we were discussing the journey through the 'cellars of life' also from another, surprising angle. We collected our thoughts on blindness and discussed them with one of the participants who actually is a blind person. The key word appeared to be 'trust': how much trust or faith do you have in others and in yourself, when you loose the thread of your life or when you are looking for support and clarity to take up the thread again?

The next step in the spiritual journey of the summer camp was to explore the world of angels in our lives. We read the text of the encounter and the struggle of Jacob with the angel at the Jabbok river (Genesis 32: 23-33) and we were defining all sorts of situations in which we felt both challenged and sheltered by a guardian angel. The ideas of the German Benedictin monk Anselm Grün were very inspiring for this *exercitio* (Grün 2002). Participants were invited to design and to fabrique their own coat of shelter.

The final day was explicitly oriented towards a religious re-imagination of the journey. There was plenty of meditation time – and time for writing and talking one's path through questions such as: 'What gives you the ultimate ground under your feet? Where do you trust in ultimately? Where does your walking-stick comes from? Where can you find solidity and resilience? When do you experience yourself most deeply loved?' We read Psalm 23, we contextualised its words in the exile of the Jewish people, and we referred to other key words in religious traditions to explicate this experience of ultimate trust and love. Finally we provided the participants with a mission (Matthew 10 – 'Feel home on the road') and with a blessing.

Many of these people are carrying heavy burdens. They are often confronted with the failures of their parents and with the pain of loosing faith in their lives. But they do continue to revitalise small experiences of hope, in community, discourse and action. And they don't stop thinking about what keeps them running. One of the things they don't like however is to identify this struggle for the good life with a definitive reference to an ultimate transcendent being. For them the source of life is immanent, it is rooted in their daily lives and narratives of friendship and commitment. If they are offered a safe environment, they are eager to talk about their spiritual resources. Safe means safe from the social pressure of uninterested peers or from the educational pressure of adults who expect particular faith answers.

In this sense, one of the most intriguing issues of youth theology – the way in young people are reframing religious tradition within their 'youth-culture-in-the-making' – is the personal God issue. Young adults challenge the traditional God concept as someone existing 'out there'. For them the fundamental longing of brother- and sisterhood for a new world and the ever surprising geniality of the human mind in dialogue with other human minds, is relating to a God dynamic, somewhere 'in here', in the communal and global movements of human souls. At the other hand however young adults express their need for an ultimate external agency, not as a control organism but as a permanent beacon of trust and faith. In our opinion the reframing of the Jewish-Christian tradition on God as a story of

deep human relationships (interpersonal beyond mere objective and mere subjective) would be a primordial task in modern theology, coming out of this confrontation with young adulthood. (Youth) culture, tradition and theology are dynamizing one another in this process.

TRADITION, LIFEWORLD AND ABDUCTION

In this last section we will pay attention to the relationship of our dynamic concept of religious culture in religious education and the very concept of tradition. It is our contention that an abductive, that is Peircean view on tradition and the lifeworld of children and youngsters can open up a hermeneutic space with an eye on both tradition and the potentials of children and youngsters. We found inspiration for such an abductive approach in a recent publication of the German religious educationalist Hans-Georg Ziebertz on abductive correlations (see Ziebertz et al, 2003).

Trying to understand and explain what is broadly going on in the domain of religious education located in the heterogeneous presentation and representation of religion in plural, late modern societies quite often use deductive and even inductive strategies to make the link between culture and tradition. These strategies have lost their good grounds in our complex contemporary societies. That is the reason to use a third, backward strategy developed by Charles Sanders Peirce and respectively coined by him with the names 'hypothesis', 'retroduction', and 'abduction' (Peirce, 1976). If we want to discover new embracing views on the realities of religious education in terms of culture and tradition in order to understand and explain what is going on, the abductive strategy can deliver such views. Not from the perspective of a fixed, deductively interpreted concept of tradition nor as an enumeration of singular, inductive facts, but as types of theoretical understanding and explanation about which we are not fully certain in terms of their theological, pedagogical and practical usefulness, but that might fulfil a heuristical function.

Dealing especially with the relation of the (religious) lifeworld of youngsters and the (Christian) religious tradition neither a inductive strategy is chosen (because the religious lifeworld of youngsters has become more and more empty), nor a deductive strategy is chosen (in which it is tried to transmit the subject-matter of the religious tradition without taking into account the experiental basis of the lifeworld of youngsters). An abductive approach is preferred in which precisely the indetermined (cor)relation between lifeworld bound experiences of youngsters and traditional Christian belief and experiences meet each other.

According to Ziebertz, the abductive approach radicalises the focus on the lifeworld and its critical stance towards theological fixation.

Although we are in general positive about the way Ziebertz *cum suis* are taken, precisely on this point we may ask whether in their elaboration the conceptual and the methodological level is not overstressed at the detriment of precisely the lifeworld, that is the experience side of religion and religious education and the participative side (see Hermans, 2003) both in the religious (i.c. the Christian) tradition and the lifeworld of youngsters.

CONCLUSION

The implications of the above mentioned concepts of culture and tradition do influence our theological concepts. There is a good 'tradition' in the field or RE which says that the educational and the theological strongly meet one another in RE One line of thought could be: how is our concept of 'revelation' influenced by our idea of culture and tradition. How does God present her/himself in our cultures and traditions? Did he/she disapprove previous static conceptions of culture and tradition? Is he/she in favour of a narrative and dynamic way of dealing with his/her stories with humankind? Can we think about a 'metamorphosis' of God in our dynamic way of dealing with complexity and diversity of cultures and traditions (Borgman, 2006)? At least one could say that the risky business of solidarity with future generations in RE – the radical openness to their spiritual resources – will have its consequences for future theology. It will shed new light on the religious words and gestures of people who educate and on their theological justification of these words and gestures. Risky solidarity is leading to the idea of a 'risky revelation'. Who actually listens carefully to the lives and hopes of future generations, could not only get involved in new patterns and contents of faith, but also in new experiences of the Holy (Roebben 2007, 233-234 and 243-248).

Siebren Miedema is Professor of Educational Foundations in the Faculty of Psychology and Education, and Professor of Religious Education in the Faculty of Theology, VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands. E-mail address: s.miedema@psy.vu.nl

Bert H.M. Roebben is Professor of Religious Education, Faculty of Humanities and Theology, University of Dortmund, Germany. E-mail address: Roebben@fb14.uni-dortmund.de

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