

# **The Decision to Hope: The Praxis of Hopeful Teaching in the Education of Religious Leaders**

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## **Introduction**

Theology is moored in time and space. Roman Catholic theology in the Netherlands and Flanders is trying to find its way in today's culture, forty years after the Second Vatican Council. Much of what was considered to be the promise of a new and grown-up church and in which especially the Netherlands served as a model for these dynamics of renewal, has stranded on the resistance of conservative forces in the church. This is painful for many who are active in the church. This pain is, however, of no concern to young adult students in theology departments. The struggle of the church with her self-understanding ever since the Second Vatican Council, has passed them by simply because they are less than forty years old. The disappointment of unkept promises, the "blues" of the eighties and early nineties ("things should be different in the church, but they can't be") is wasted on them. They would rather know what is driving religiously convinced people, i.e. Christians, to experience and answer present-day questions in their own specific way. And at the same time Christian churches are confronted for the first time in their history with a generation of young adults who have been hardly religiously socialized at home. Young theologians are voicing this experience of their contemporaries. This situation is food for thought.

What Jan Bluysen, former bishop of 's-Hertogenbosch (Netherlands) already wrote in the eighties "after the great church abandonment", is applicable more than ever to religious communication in modern society. From a catechetical concern he writes in the late eighties: "We are not in the need of believers who worry day in day out about how for heaven's sake they can go on with *this* church. Nor do we need believers who fearfully mourn the losses of the church. Young people who see their elders deal with their Christianity in such a strained manner, or see them struggle so painfully with the questions of our times, will hardly be tempted to join the Lord and his church. What we need first and foremost is people who give evidence of a well-tested and deep-seated faith in God" (Bluysen 1989, 195). Practical theology can reinforce this question, place it in a new time frame ("joining the Lord and his church" might have meant something different in the eighties than it does in 2002) and reflect on it theologically. In any case the request for authentic religious communication in our society and for the presence of the Christian tradition is prominent. Theologically educated young adults who I meet, in the Netherlands and in Flanders, in higher education, intermediary relations in church and society and all sorts of volunteering, show these dynamics.

In this essay I would like to systematize these dynamics as follows. In the first section (problem definition) I will indicate in what manner traditional religious institutions try to deal with the pressure of modernization in society (and therefore upon them). The point I am making is that churches do not know how to deal with these developments. They appear to be unable to convey their traditions of meaningful life to future generations. In the second section (analysis) I attempt to go beyond the perspective of the crisis of tradition and I opt to corroborate the creative powers in a modern society in its search for meaning from a religious perspective. I analyze the process of 'interactive search for meaning' of my contemporaries and offer some critical notes in the margin. As a practical theologian I would like to offer insight in the ways churches might react, now that they are confronted with new challenges. This will be done in the third section (perspective). I believe that churches should set themselves up as mature dialogue partners 'in religiosis'. They should dare to bring their language of meaningful life in a critical interrelationship with the way life is experienced nowadays. This assumes

new priorities where religious socialization, communication and leadership are concerned. At the end of this contribution (section four: strategy) I make a plea for religious education of young adults. More than ever before, religious socialization of children assumes educating young adults as future parents in matters of religious communication.

## **1. Problem definition: society under the pressure of modernization, churches under the pressure of tradition**

Present-day society is pressured to modernize. This is a development with deep-seated historical roots. Its analysis is complex. Karl Gabriel, the German sociologist of religion, interprets this as follows: de-traditionalization concerning frameworks of values and meaning causes people to fall back on themselves to give meaning to their lives (Gabriel 1991, 69-88). The supply at the 'meaning-seeking-market' is broad, there is no shortage of religion and search for meaning. People have to steer by their own compass to make responsible choices from this supply. Ever since Enlightenment traditional religious institutions have lost more and more of their function of orientation in moral and religious symbolization. A systematic approach of this situation by re-confessionalization and denominational segregation (or 'pillarization') in the Netherlands and Flanders (especially in the educational and health care sector in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century) has not been able to turn the tide. Also the Netherlands and Flanders became more and more secularized. Research of sociology of religion has confirmed this trend.

Along with this de-confessionalization the de-traditionalization has progressed even further and faster than before. At many levels of society institutionalized religious traditions have lost their "good grounds" to find acceptance for a religious stance concerning existential questions and the transfer of faith. There is a crisis of tradition. The process of religious 'tradere' (Latin for passing on) itself has become problematic, sometimes even lost. The relation faith-life is characterized by correlation weakness, or even a breach in correlation. Young people wonder pityingly: "What is it that religious people talk about? What are they getting upset about?" Attempts by theology to re-establish the plausibility of a religious perspective on every day life deal with the same crisis that institutionalized religions are experiencing. The traditional crisis is to be felt deep into the reflexive layers of religious institutions.

In this section I proceed as follows: First I define four problem areas concerning religious communication (two ecclesiological and two religious educational) that offer insight in the given that churches nowadays do not know how to offer a meaningful learning route 'in religiosis'. Subsequently I refer to two explanation models for this situation out of the sociology of religion. Finally I indicate what concrete actions churches undertake nowadays in order to deal with the given circumstances.

### 1.1. Four problem areas

1.1.1. First of all, it is true that virtually no *substratum of experience* corresponds to the traditional religious socialization of the church anymore. People do not identify with the church anymore, they do not understand its language anymore, do not know what it wants to express with its symbols and sacraments. If young people, for example, do not know of the effectiveness of salvation (*opus operatum*), how can they be expected to engage in the sacrament out of a personal involvement (*opus operantis*) (Roebben 1999). When this religious mooring disappears, so does the social relevance of faith. People continue to belong to the church by means of baptism, but (virtually) no any praxis, religious experience and practical insight in the liberating dynamics of the gospel corresponds with it.

The official church finds its influence in the life of believers shrinking and attempts to win them back by entrusting religious socialization to the family in a gesture of generosity. It no longer claims to be the originator, but positions the center in the 'home church???' and its permanent religious initiation. The former secretary of the Council for Family Ministry in Flanders, Paul Deleu, has seriously criticized this development: "The greater the established secularism, the greater the expectation of the church with respect to the family. As if secularism has stopped at the threshold of the home church. By

thinking about the family in this manner one does not really approach it for its own worth, but as the carrier of frustrated church expectations”. And this leads to the paradox: “One can proclaim that the family is an in-between that can evangelize and be evangelized, and still ignore the specific experience of the evangelizing family” (Deleu 1988, 52). On the face of it, the attention is shifted from occasional catechesis in church towards a permanent evangelization in the home church, from church initiative towards support of religious education at home, but the concern remains the same: to close the gap between church and world and to strive for the highest possible degree of participation in the life of the church.

1.1.2. In line with the above, authors like Erich Feifel and Walter Kasper (1987), Karl Gabriel (1991), Franz-Xavier Kaufmann and Günther Stachel (1980) and Volker Drehsen (1994) have phrased interesting thoughts about the *crisis of credibility of the church* in a postmodern society. The church stands in its own way if it makes people responsible for personal belief on the one hand, but does not permit the development of dissenting views or praxis on the other hand. People are leaving the church because they are kept in their place because of a traditional socialization idea (Drehsen 1994, 48-55). The church is faced with an immense educational dilemma, according to Drehsen: either it persists in its infertile attitude of being in the right until it has become totally unworldly and sectarian, or it takes up the challenge of the ‘Tradieringskrise’ and turns it into the focus of mature religious communication itself. In another analysis Drehsen states that as a result of this situation the church is no longer capable of formulating the true religious questions of modern people. Ever since the process of secularization has started, it has not taken advantage of the return of religion in many new colors. That is its ultimate tragedy: people cannot find their way in church, it conveys little to them, because it conveys little ‘about’ them. They do not feel heard in their quest for religious self-clarification, in their efforts to deal with the contingency of life in a meaningful way. The church is struggling in its heart of hearts with its ‘religiöse Integrationsfähigkeit’ (Drehsen 1994, 8), with the question of how to ‘authenticate and communicate’ its religious message within a modern world that is confused and self-confident at the same time.

1.1.3. Another element in the explanation of the absence of successful religious socialization by the church is of a social-pedagogical nature and has to do with the *educative uncertainty* of parents and educators. They hesitate to continue to raise their children within a Christian perspective. Either they have dropped out in the opinion that the message of the church has lost its credibility in their eyes or they lack the nerve to point out the religious dimension of life to their children altogether. Some parents do not have their children baptized (anymore) in the opinion that they should leave them free to make the decision themselves later in their lives. They assume that an education devoid of value judgments and religion is possible, or in other words that the perspectives of life and faith are completely incompatible. The church and its message does not appeal to them, it does not arouse their interest, therefore it has nothing worthwhile to offer, according to their reasoning.

Other parents are all too happy to see their son/daughter initiated in the full life of the church by way of the first communion or confirmation without realizing that this implies engagement. They shrink from questions about this half-heartedness, stay away from catechetical introductions for parents but drift along on the flow of what is socio-culturally taken for granted. If children are no longer aware of the scope of, for example, confirmation and only concentrate on the festivities and presents and parents cannot or dare not voice an alternative (not even a generally sacral, a religious or non-materialistic perspective), then it is to be expected that this process only enlarges the educational embarrassment of parents. The youthful perception of reality (being in fashion, on top of the latest trends, flexible) becomes the norm. Parents are unable to deny their children the celebration annex festivities surrounding confirmation, because it would make them lose face with their friends. In these confusing times children frequently lack grown up ‘biographical advisors’, adults who have in mind something other than a certain degree of material habituation and a lukewarm identity (Roebben 1994; 1995).

1.1.4. A final explanation arises from the radically *different experience of being young* nowadays. Adolescence differs structurally from the way it was some forty years ago. It is no longer viewed as a

storm-free transition from childhood to adulthood (between the age of 12 and 18), but as a turbulent and independent period in which adolescents create their own biography and attempt to gain insight into the dynamics of their own story, identity and person (Schweitzer 1993; see also Roebben 1997). Nowadays being young means that one has to learn to deal with the fact that as a (young) adult one will have to live continually in a situation of transition. One has to take an honest and integrated standpoint in this postmodern experience of 'social mobility'. In addition to that, the onset of adolescence has been accelerated (earlier than 12) and the period of schooling prolonged, so that the entrance into the world of adulthood, employment, partner choice and raising a family has been postponed.

All this, according to Friedrich Schweitzer, has drastic consequences for religious socialization, for example for confirmation. This no longer serves to demarcate the passage into adulthood, it has lost its social impact as a moment of initiation (Schweitzer 1993, 77-79). The sacrament of confirmation can therefore no longer be legitimized theologically from this viewpoint. Furthermore, the prolonged biography of youth entails that those who join in children's and family services become progressively younger (Schweitzer 1993, 80) and that the young adult (or post-adolescent) parents with small children of today feel that they belong to that generation segment of 'youth' with its typical experience of life. This new situation implies an important task for youth ministry that in this context has to work with young people mainly on 'moral/religious self-clarification' and building of identity against the background of a blurred society, according to Schweitzer (1993, 85).

## 1.2. Two models of explanation

In sociology of religion in the past forty years at least two models of explanation have been developed (Ebertz 1999; Ziebertz 1999). One speaks of the *secularization thesis*: religion in general and the churches in particular are no longer the overarching 'meaning-prompters' for culture and society. They have lost their impact in several domains of human life. Nowadays people self-confidently search for meaning. The term 'functional differentiation' applies here: within the complexity of life its domains have become disconnected. They have grown apart more and more and have started to lead their own life. Religion is but one of those domains, conveniently next to and apart from the others, just like for example relationships, raising children, education, work, leisure, sports, etc. Additionally, in sociology of religion one speaks of the *modernization thesis*. Traditional religious institutions have indeed lost their influence; however, at the same time former churchgoers and their contemporaries are freely and unrestrainedly searching for meaning in their lives. Individualization is the keyword of modern culture and this carries over into the area of religion. De-traditionalization has the effect that people no longer find inspiration for their own way in life in traditions as passed on by religious institutions. Living authentically means that one can and dares to steer by his or her own compass. Pluralization is the result of this development: numerous religious options that can be combined indefinitely (syncretism) are available in modern culture. One can speak of a 'reli-market' – where a person can offer his own life project as ware and where the customer can get a bargain and determine whether and how much religion one takes home. "Could you make that a little more, please?"

Because of the disappearance of the great narratives that build a context of meaningfulness, people have been left to their own devices. They are in each other's charge, but at each other's mercy as well. After all, individualization can also pressure people: "I *have* to be free and authentic". It carries the risk of being lived, because the task of making choices time and again is felt as too much of a burden. Paradoxically our freedom becomes a constraint. "I determine" becomes equal to "I am determined". The building blocks of freedom have become nothing other than monoliths, organically fitted into what the market requires. Added to this can be the fact that the promise of modernization of culture as a project of meaning seeking is often not fulfilled. The 'meaning-seeker-without-compass', the person who has freed himself from enslaving traditions, often enough chokes on the experience of contingency and ambiguity, an experience that not only characterized human life in the old days, but still does today. The promise of the makability of our own life and of life as a self-directed project, which is what modernity is all about, often dead-ends in itself. Since no one can direct the contingent

circumstances of his or her own life, especially not the last circumstance: death. The core of the human self is “not available”. And that is disturbing to modern people.

Religion can serve the purpose of contingency management. People can experiment with alternative medicine and meditation. They join eager groups that offer the opportunity of contact with what goes beyond everyday reality. After abandoning the church, they knock on the doors of private caregivers who design religious rituals for key moments in life. Popular religion is booming. In the overheated sorry-culture confession is called upon once again. The ‘new-religious longing’ (according to the Dutch systematic theologian Anton van Harskamp 2000) is developing in many ways in the tension between the individualization of meaning and the awareness of its ultimate unavailability.

### 1.3. Three possible reactions

The temptation is great for churches to welcome this ‘new receptivity’ with open arms and to functionalize it in view of new membership. The temptation exists to focus exclusively on the new and new-religious longing to undo the church’s own anemia and to adapt to what is marketable. And there is the temptation of the ‘snuggle strategy’, of cocooning in the conviction of ultimately being in the right. This option has a variation that is milder: that of re-profiling what is typically Christian, in view of a more forceful testimony in the world of meaning-seekers. The German sociologist of religion, Michael Ebertz, distinguishes three possible reactions: the option of self-complacency (with the corresponding strategy of closing rank – since the world is in the wrong), the option of self-regulation (with the adaptation strategy – since we have to get through these difficult times) and the option of self-direction (with the development strategy – which are the opportunities for learning and change in this situation?) (Ebertz 1999, 140-141). He makes a plea for the third option and strategy. Only then churches can become sacrament of salvation for the world. Since that is what they are meant to be, according to Ebertz.

There is much uncertainty in church circles about how to deal with religiosity outside the church. One thing is for sure: the dynamics *ad intra* (what does modernization of religion mean for a community of believers?) and the dynamics *ad extra* (what can churches mean to modernized contemporaries?) need to remain connected. Self-absorption of the church on the one hand or its clearance sale to culture on the other hand does not serve any purpose. In the research project ‘God in the Netherlands’ this ambivalence is recognized, but at the same time one remarks that it is not easy, from a church political point of view, to keep these two motions together. Choices have to be made, according to this paper (Dekker, de Hart & Peters 1997, 117-123). This process of prioritizing calls for profound analysis.

## 2. Analysis: the longing for religious orientation in modern culture

For a modernized perspective of religion ‘creative perception’ is necessary. In the analysis one needs to be courageous in order to look at reality differently. The present-day crisis of faith might be an optical illusion: maybe churches are so focused on certain developments that they are unable to see the new ones. Is what is happening to a modern community of faith comparable to the sinking of the Titanic, a fortress of power that is perishing and desperately casting life-boats from where one wistfully looks back at what is gone forever? Or is it something else: is today’s culture more like a sea of meaning on which many drift about without any sense of orientation, in search of a perspective of meaningful life; as an open space of discovery of meaning out of whose depths the Christian story emerges next to other fragmented frames of reference; as a collection of disparate pieces of wreckage, that remind us of a rich and dynamic past, to which the meaning-seeker can cling?

### 2.1. Kairologic analysis

The first scenario, a disaster scenario, refers to the secularization thesis of the former paragraph, the second scenario, an emergence scenario, refers to the modernization thesis. Emergence points at the positive act of coming up for air, of recovering one’s breath. At the same time it points at the urgent nature (*emergency*) of this analysis: who spends too much time mourning the lost glory will be unable

to see through the tears that people in their vitality are already busy looking for a new *modus vivendi*. Modern theology should keep an open mind for this development and should be open to the signals of the young who have no experience of the struggle that the church has gone through in its Titanic-phase. Schematically both scenarios yield the following ways of being-church. For the time being they help us look at religiously charged reality in a clear and original way.

Disaster scenario	Emergence Scenario
Ideological	Spiritual
Moralistic	Enthusiastic
Imposed	Self-directed
Top down	Contextual
Retrospective	Innovative
Self-glorifying	Self-criticizing

In practical theology a kairologic awareness is present: the practical theologian can choose a hopeful perspective for assessing a situation, because he or she is convinced that it concerns a *kairos*, an inspired moment for a new and critical praxis. This *kairos* is founded in the conviction that reality does not shut tight once and for all, but remains open as a meaningful and humanizing event that can be assented to and interpreted by people. Viewing the current situation as a ‘crisis’ and considering practical theology as some sort of ‘science of crisis’ does little justice to the search for truth of people today and to the freedom of the coming of God in the middle of this process of searching for truth (to use the words of the theology of hope). The term ‘crisis’ presumes a deficiency, something that is lost. It sounds wistful and threatens to play down what is new and trying to break through in time. The term *kairos*, on the contrary, has a positive meaning. It refers to the trust in the fullness of reality, as it is intrinsically comprehensible for contemporaries and contains ‘opportunities to learn and change’ (Michael Ebertz).

## 2.2. Interactive search for meaning

Every person searches for meaning, develops dynamics for his or her life, consciously or subconsciously. Whenever those dynamics are interpreted as a finality with an origin and a goal, one speaks of a philosophy of life; this in its turn can be filled in an explicitly religious or prophane way. As is argued above, search for meaning is a syncretic event nowadays. Young people are dealing flexibly and unrestrainedly with what is pre-given, with whatever they happen upon. The pleasure of *surfing* (exploring), *fiddling* (taking apart) and *sampling* (mixing) of moral and religious convictions and life patterns often in different settings at the same time, is more important than the final result. The latter is difficult for young people to envision as a matter of fact, because things were not thought out or planned in advance. Two Dutch youth researchers, Jacques Janssen and Maarten Prins, speak of the primacy of action over reflection and of annexing religious traditions as a ‘toolkit of symbols’ (2000, 12) in that process. And especially: “the building-schemes can only be made after their buildings have been completed” (2000, 11). Older people tend to feel insecure with such a ‘balancing identity’; but the young feel like fish in the water. Mobile phones and chat-boxes on the internet are favorite media for them to undertake action, to develop patterns and ways of thinking on the go – in and through the interaction with peers, without building-schemes, purely for the pleasure of exchange. Action to them is inter-action, dynamics and involvement.

Also religious language games do not escape this enthusiastic process of annexing. Young people are abundantly experimenting with religion. The attraction of crossing the boundaries of reality, the utopia and the relationality of religion appeals to them. Older people can be shocked by this annexation of religion in youth culture and view it as a lack of respect. But in the mean time it is really happening: “the irreverent spiritual quest of generation X” (Beaudoin 1998). Numerous music clips contain religious connotations and artifacts. There are sites on the internet that offer an alternative (Christian) ceremony. Youth channels are deliberately taking a religious stance and are aiming at some kind of democratization of religion. Examples of this development abound. One of them is especially

eloquent. It was picked from the program *Republica* on Studio Brussels, a Flemish youth station. It has a section ‘*Van god los*’ (cut off from god) in which streetreporter Peter Derie addresses young people in the street and asks their opinion about a variety of religious topics. Lieven Vandenhoute, the host of *Republica*, motivates his decision to tackle religion as follows: “Religion is no nonsense. It is an essential part of human beings. In *Republica* we have fun talking about everything that makes life worth living: theater, books, sports, fitness, fashion – only religion we safely ignore. Why would I stay away from it, when it is truly fascinating? Religion is one of the major realizations of human beings – I am not the only one who thinks that way – and postmodern people are slowly realizing that they should not throw away the child with the bathwater, that if we push religion out of our daily thinking, it surfaces elsewhere in the form of an addiction to shopping, for example. A creditcard becomes heaven on earth. But religion is always there. You show it out of your house by the front door and it sneaks back in through the back”.

What acts as a general principle in construction of culture, acts in the construction of meaning and religion as well. What I am saying is: “No matter how fast the young can run, their elders will catch up with them” (Jacques Janssen). Retro-socialization (Roebben 1997, 334), or the fact that adults often imitate the disrespectful behavior, options and patterns of youngsters, is also the case here. In the *main stream* culture religious elements resurface. God and religion are allowed to be topics again in popular radio and television programs, if coming from unexpected sources. The internet is crowded with religious sites. After eroticism, religion is the most popular topic. After the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 the interest in religious information has leapt forward (thus [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com)). People want objective information about other religions, but more profound than that, there is a need for a language to tackle one’s confusion at the level of religious orientation. One example is striking. On the website of Reata Strickland, a teacher of religion in Buhl (Alabama, US), an ‘Interview with God’ can be read ([www.reata.org](http://www.reata.org)). On a nice summer day this lady coupled some nature shots with profound views of life and assembled them as a dialogue between God and human and placed them on the internet. After four days it turned out that half a million people had visited her site. The interview has been translated in twelve languages by now (medio 2002) and she receives thousands of reactions with personal stories, questions, suggestions every day.

An important aspect in the development of the interactive search for meaning is its commercialization. The ‘dissemination’ (Ebertz 1998, 148-149) and democratization of religious matters in modern culture is of interest to marketers. They are always looking for new trends that can be marketed. Just like commercials play with the ecological and ethical sensitivity of potential buyers (think of ‘green products’, the ‘clean clothes’-campaign and cars with ‘controlled performance’), the market goes along with the present-day longing for religious orientation in the search for meaning. Coca-Cola is a terrific example of this. In its clips it makes use of young people who have mock religious experiences in nature and in friendship. This company employs a dazzling and contemporary *styling* to voice the more profound longing of young people to launch its message ... “Enjoy Coca-Cola”. A deep longing for community, for a firm basis, etc. is picked from the collective memory of modern young people, thematized, pictured seductively and subsequently neatly filled in materially. I suspect this multinational of having the know-how of professional theologians at its disposal in the marketing-department!

### 2.3. Critical evaluation

It is true that our contemporaries are looking for firm ground, an existential mooring for their search for authenticity. They are able to find this in religion. It is true that the plurality of life makes people long for fulfillment and wholeness, something that can already be found in religious encounters and communities of all sorts (Van Harskamp 2000). It is true that young people are making a challenging track in this process: the development of their identity is taking place in a culture that is searching for an identity itself. However, should we not place some critical notes in the margin concerning this development? Three aspects require our attention – because they illicit criticism from a Christian-theological perspective, and because they are food for thought to explore new horizons of religious communication at the same time.

The first comment has to do with the aspect of esthetical use or ‘glamorization’ of religion. Everything gets linked to everything. Elements picked from different religions, are gathered and collected in a patchwork quilt. Nothing is holy in itself. The attraction of religion lies only in the attraction of this process of taking into use. Therefore it cannot be claimed that young people are totally isolated from religious language games. On the contrary, in their search they rearrange old frames of reference. They fall back on chunks of religious socialization from the old days. The question that surfaces, however, is the following: Does it go any further than just attribution, does the basic religious experience of those terms mean anything to young people? In other words, is it only the functional aspect of religion that remains (attribution), religion aimed at making the contingency of life tolerable and exciting, and not the substantial meaning of religion (experience)? And is the substantial role of religion at all possible without being anchored in a community of faith? Or even: is a new type of religion developing, one that is completely self-directed? A new type of religious self-awareness, making use of the affirmative language of religions, but reworded in a completely individualized re-composition?

A second problem is linked with this: Assuming that religion is designed for search, in which the experience of searching itself takes priority over finding, how can the aspect of action of such a venture be studied? If it is true that “the building-schemes are made after their buildings have been completed” (Janssen & Prins 2000, 11), how can the designers be approached? Young people want action, rather than reflection. They do not ask for the meaning of things, they use the meaning. They recreate a chaotic and confused jumble of impulses into a livable whole. Do the young handy-men know what they are doing, what they are getting into? May we speak of a new habitat, one that is held together by shoestring, but viewed more closely a source of inspiration for the young themselves? And could this be a rich experience to them, beyond traditional religious substances?

Next comes the question: is it true religion that is involved here? True religion articulates the relationship between the life of human beings that is visible and what transcends it. It takes a position in the tension between existential self-management and ultimate perspective, or the tension between individualization of meaning and the awareness of its ultimate non-availability. However, the new religious longing threatens to continue the myth of self-realization that is so characteristic for our day and age. It leads people to expect that they will be able to escape the ruthlessness of time by following a merciful alternative under one’s own steam. This already hard existence becomes even more burdened: One has to realize his or her own salvation. In true religion a person is urged to be guided by the wisdom of predecessors, who struggled in their own way with the same questions and were able to find parts of answers. Religion leads people into a symbolic order that can liberate them as a person.

Here one could also remark: is religion taking on a fundamentally new appearance? Is the substantial element abandoned in preference of the merely functional aspect? Is the break in culture complete in the sense that people can only be approached as far as the profane aspect of religion is concerned? Will there be a religion without God before long? The Dutch theologian Anton van Harskamp claims that in the mean time we should wait for God – now that He is ‘out of the picture’. His colleague, Erik Borgman, wonders if God will reveal himself in a new shape or that God will never be okay again. Apparently theologians admit that there is no way around these difficult questions any longer. Religion is being used by people (for their own salvation) – and that is contrary to an important characteristic of religion in general and Christianity in particular: religion will not be used, that is not what it is for. Religion is gratuitous, something that indeed confirms human deliberations, but transcends, questions and challenges them as well.

### **3. Perspective: churches as mature dialogue partners ‘in religiosis’**

An embankment of the longing for religious orientation in our present-day culture can be discerned. People do not stay impassive in their quest for meaning in complex times. This longing is ambivalent and calls for clarification. For the practical theologian who considers it his/her job to perceive culture in an intensified theological perspective, this means a challenge to open up new horizons of religious communication. The questions are numerous: How will believers evaluate this situation theologically?



How do they view themselves? And how will the theological tradition be revitalized? Which role do churches claim in this process? In this section I will indicate several crucial dimensions of a church community that is critically interpellating and recognizably involved in life at the same time, that neither turns away from nor gets lost in this epoch.

### 3.1. Reading the 'signs of the times' - beyond pastoral crisis technology

With the kairologic perspective (par. 2.1.) I have chosen for the hopeful analysis, averse to pastoral panic and heftics. I assume that the future of traditional religious institutions lies in a day to day willingness to be open to the culture and to trust culture to be a place of religious confrontation and deepening. Too much pastoral activity shuts off this possibility and suffers of self-complacency (Ebertz, par. 1.3.), of the illusion that nothing is wrong and that everything should continue along the old and familiar tracks, embellished with the newest tricks of 'pastoral crisis technology'. However, when the deeper and supportive layers of ministry are barely touched upon in the work itself, people who are searching for religious orientation turn away from it. Since ministry can give the impression of ruthlessness: full of itself, disconnected from the deep longing in culture, and even worse, cut off from the source of life that inspires it.

If, however, the ministry knows how to master the art of listening at the new-religious longing and wording it in the language in which it is anchored itself, the opportunity for new things will arise. This tension between inside and outside, refreshing itself at its own sources of faith in view of a better understanding of religious revitalization of culture, this mutual transformation of Christian tradition and cultural context, is pre-eminently the task of Christianity today. The "critical interrelationship" of text and context, of theological tradition and present-day culture, on the basis of the story of grace of Christianity (in a nutshell: God who cares about the well-being of people, who declares his solidarity in the person of the living Jesus, to make people become fully human, united and merciful towards each other and their world) is the task of Christians today: as study and as engagement. This calls for a fundamental choice of openness of the churches towards the signs of the times.

### 3.2. Support for religious socialization in families

Religious socialization in a postmodern context can no longer be viewed as an offer that is already defined in time and space, but it will rather have to be considered as a *lengthy and interactive process* in which the critical education of the young, the skill to find their way independently in a dynamic environment and to word their own point of view, should be the focus. The fact that the young go a different direction from what their predecessors had hoped for in the beginning, is inherent to the possible outcome of that process of socialization. The crux of the matter is that acquiring one's own identity can be viewed as a religious process and can therefore be the content of religious education. The initial religious sensibility is then no longer the starting-point of a systematic explanation of religion and faith, but the theme itself of this learning process.

How will this process remain sufficiently socially coherent? There is only one sensible way, in my opinion, and that is a permanent communication among all parties involved. Erik Vossen, a Dutch religious educationalist, has eminently proved before how this communicative view of religious socialization can take place within the family. First of all it presumes sufficient attention for the initiation aspect of the socialization: "The religious development of children is to a large degree a social learning process, in which learning goals and content are determined by the parents (either consciously or subconsciously) and in which they supply the actual 'learning material' by way of the examples set by their own practice. Those parents who truly want to guide their children towards a personal deliberation of their religious orientation and thereby offer their own beliefs and praxis as a starting-point, will have to concretely initiate their children" (Vossen 1989, 128-129). This is not indoctrination, according to Vossen, this an aspect of development: "(Since) we have no other choice than to follow a strategy of transmission and making-familiar for young children, if we want to hand them enough material in order to make their own critical choice later on. What matters is, how we handle this already laid foundation later in the religious education" (124). Of great importance is how religious practices (like evening prayer and regular

talks about faith – practices with a highly socializing value) are framed in a general openness for the life of parents and children. What sticks in the experience of young people is the willingness of adults to justify what they do and do not do. The best way to learn is the confrontation with adults who are not yet ‘finished’ or have ‘been there’, but who want to learn and grow, and who want to involve their children in this learning process. This ‘communicative initiation’ within the family seems to be a major challenge for vigorous communities of faith. Here the religious socialization of children acquires new dynamics, namely from the religious communication with young adults. This way a new meaning can arise, as a self-discovered ‘horizon’ of meaningful and authentic life, that is worth passing on, communicatively to fellow travelers and intergenerationally to one’s own children. This way a new language will originate, anchored in private life experience and mastered in personal involvement.

### 3.3. Religious communication in a language that is concerned with life

How can such a language come into existence and be confirmed? How can the social stratum in which the request for religious orientation is made, grow into a new language experience for communities of faith? The need is great and many immediate ‘Ersatz’ solutions can be thought of. For example the churches could present the Christian faith as a radical anti-story, represented as a leap into the dark, as an option – as “go swim by yourself in the abysmal deep of the deposit of faith”. Churches could charm people to take the step towards full identification with Christian faith. One could speed up the process of joining by skipping the cultivation of the longing. One could aim for a uniformly accelerated motion in the direction of the creed. The tender societal stratum, like a vulnerable river bed, however, would not be able to handle this. The water is hardly deep enough to catch all those who might jump. And modern people will not be persuaded to let their life story be determined by the comments of others. They want to be the architect of their life story themselves. What they cannot appropriate will never become clear to them.

The Flemish dogmatic theologian Peter Schmidt has made an impressive analysis of the loss of meaning of religious language, when it is no longer sufficiently supported by contemporary human experience. The problem of the comprehensibility of faith in the church can be avoided perfectly well, according to Schmidt, “by curving back on oneself mentally”. That is the way it often happens. Spiritual leaders are friendly, cooperative where others are concerned, but avoid expressing the “truth of faith” (Schmidt 1993, 87). “A lot of attention is paid to the interior decoration of the fortress of faith. The fact, however, that the drawbridges have been drawn, thus keeping anyone from entering, is a problem that one would rather not pay attention to” (90). And Schmidt continues by saying: “If the communicated content of faith is true in a totally different way than the way it is expressed, why should it be expressed that way? The language game used, cannot be converted into another anymore” (97). All that can still be done, is soulless repetition and imitation. In other words: A religious language game that ignores the religious longing in which it could be embedded, becomes esoteric and devoid of meaning. Those who lead in church no longer understand themselves what it is they believe and in which they feel obliged to guide others. That is the worst that can happen to a community of faith – that it has nothing left to say, not *ad extra*, not *ad intra*.

### 3.4. Towards new forms of religious leadership

“After the Second Vatican Council one has paid too little attention to education of the public”, Mgr. Alfred Daelemans, former director-general of the Flemish Secretariat of Catholic Education once confided to me in the early nineties. I think that indeed a major part of the depression in the Roman Catholic church in particular has to do with this. Laymen feel attracted to the *aggiornamento* of the council. Attention was paid to their active participation in church, liturgy, catechesis and ministry, but too little was invested in educating and encouraging them at the intersection of faith and culture. There were some good initiatives; but no lay theology. For concrete questions from everyday life (intimate relationships, raising children, work relations, tension family-work, etc.) a normative way of speaking of the church was available, but that was miles away from the actual experience and words of regular searching believers. The Canadian Dominican J.-M. Tillard thinks that, with regard to searching contemporaries, the church has adapted or hidden itself too much – as it were “entre le magistère des mass media et le magistère de la chair ecclésiale”. No real confrontation has taken place with the intelligence of the faith in daily life, the

church has not been able to show younger generations what the authority of faith means to those who are in tune with their own experience, according to Tillard (1997, 14).

In this context the importance of new forms of religious leadership should be mentioned. In a complex society like ours, in which many alternatives are present (par. 2), a need for authentic identification figures exists, people of flesh and blood who live the ‘Verbindlichkeit’ of a religiously inspired life project in the double sense of the word: they feel obliged to live it and they feel connected with it. Erik Vossen has pointed out before that “current culture [makes] Christianity insufficiently explicit to enable young people to make sense of religious-Christian examples” (Vossen 1986, 250). Many examples and ideals are shown, but they are often so exalted and idealized (think of Mother Theresa, Oscar Romero, a.o.), that a critical confrontation frequently leads to frustration. There is a need for a real life and ‘semantically explicit’ (Vossen) religious leadership that is ‘food for thought’, that can be disputed, questioned and tested. This can also be an inspiration to concrete spiritual leaders such as parents and educators; they can be pioneers and maybe heralds of a new and realistic justification of faith. All of this presupposes guidance, education and support of parents and educators. Since in confrontation with their children their own questions, lamentations and inability surface. Religious socialization of children can, as stated before, no longer leave out a critical retrospective view of the story of faith of the adults themselves. Religious socialization and its justification (from a meta-perspective) in religious communication are intertwined (Roebben 2001).

#### **4. Strategy: the option of religious education of young adults**

A new generation of young adults is lining up, who have had no or hardly any religious socialization. This is new in history. This generation has fallen prey to the current pressure of modernization. The idea of the directability of life, work and love is imprinted in them in many different ways. They are the primary targets of advertising and marketing. In addition to that they are expected as young employees or managers, as young lovers, as young parents, as young homeowners, etc. to fulfill their social ‘duties’ and make responsible choices. To endure all this and keep it together they ‘use’ religion, esthetized and self-directed. Their search for meaning is interactive: pick up whatever fits your life project. For this they appeal to the ‘expertise’ of the church.

Their cultural context is a *kairos*: not to steer them into church in view of the future and the vitality of the community of faith, but to bring them in touch with the flow of grace that streams from the religious tradition of Christianity as a possible answer to their longing for a final orientation, or at least as a clarification of their questions concerning this. This answer is not a mere blind to take away the pain of daily contingency management, but a critical eye-opener to review their own life project and make it tolerable. Gérard Defois, bishop of Rijsel, calls this ‘wide angle ministry’. Michaël Ebertz speaks of ‘communication ministry’ (1998, 144-145). The large group of interested, who seem to be looking to approach the church, are not left out at the gate. They are invited to move into the space between the inside and the outside of the church, in the passage between culture and faith.

This openness is not a form of church expansionism, but a contemporary understanding of how Christians can be present in the world. Their presence in society is no longer monolithic, their message not to be taken or left. They can be inspiring on the road to the truth, a truth that in accordance with human life consists of many facets. The times of the massive ‘opposite’ of Christianity have passed; the temptation exists of withdrawing with like-minded in a ‘snuggle strategy’. I wonder if that suffices – evangelically speaking. Can Christians take the liberty of losing their flexibility and of being put off to the side? For the time being quite a few people are still in and out of the church. Often they come into contact with it through traditional pastoral activities: a funeral, a marriage, a baptism, the first communion and confirmation of their children. All of these activities, however, are diminishing (especially marriage) or are experienced as being without a meaningful future (especially confirmation). The traditional forms of social presence of faith are dampened down further. How will the story of faith become visible in the future: authentically, sensibly and evangelically flexibly?

In line of the above I make a plea for religious education of young adults. Instead of continuing to invest the available energy in the catechesis of children (first communion and confirmation at an early age), the church could ask itself how it can serve the longing for religious orientation of young adult contemporaries. Partly this is done already in connection with the sacraments of marriage and of the baptism/first communion of children. At parents' evenings one notices that young parents like to pass on something of value in the moral and religious upbringing of their children, but that they usually lack the words. Their anthropological experience of birth and parenthood does not get enough response and religious interpretation from the highly sacramental message of church baptism. And when young children grow up and start asking questions about life, young parents are often at a loss for answers or an attitude of answering (Schweitzer 2000). In the meantime – i.e. now that it is still not clear what to do with the catechesis of sacraments – it seems very important to me to involve the parents as much as possible in the religious education that is part of the sacrament (of their children).

There are other ways, however, to address young adults from the side lines. I think of encounter groups (for instance in higher vocational education and universities), of intervision groups of young people in the same profession (for instance new nurses, teachers, etc.) and other intensive meetings (like summer camps) and forms of cultural service of churches to young adult meaning seekers (through websites, publications, information evenings), etc. This calls for a different kind of engagement of the church: it offers its own house and its own expertise as a forum, as a space in which the process of searching of young adults can grow and be enriched.

It is not about actualizing or adapting the Christian message, but about rereading of the particular context of young adults from the perspective of the gospel. Often the 'process of revelation' starts with opening the senses, with learning to read one's own life again, with reconnecting with one's own sources of imagination and creativity. Because it is shocking to see how much goodwill, how much desire to live a truly good life (in relationships, at work, during time off, etc.) is undone by the media, hard work and hyped up relationships at the age of young adults. Many of the small stories are trampled by the big story of the market. The gospel can refute this ruthlessness and show images of truly good life. Fact is that young people cannot be talked into anything. If they are unable to see for themselves how an old story is capable of uprooting the self-evidences and/or brokenness of their story, nothing happens. If the flow of grace does not come from the inside, can be rediscovered and worded from their own experience of longing for grace, nothing happens. The social river bed is present, it should be broadened and deepened by encounters with contemporaries and wise insights from the past. However, the question is: will there be enough people left in churches who are willing and able to inhabit this meeting place in an inspired and sensible way?

## **Epilogue**

These reflections fit in the broader perspective of renewed attention for adult religious education. In the Dutch and Flemish dioceses many initiatives have arisen during the past five years. It is realized that no longer all salvation is to be expected of religious education of children. In addition to that, religious communication takes on a different hue in a society of choices, especially that of personal engagement. I conclude here that these initiatives take many forms corresponding to concrete local needs and requests.

It was my intention mainly to make clear that the new generation young adults, just like the current one, has the right to a personally appropriated experience of faith. However, the complexity of this experience in the given circumstances is much greater for future adults. That is the reason why this kind of work is even more exciting than it already is with 'normal' adults, but paradoxically also relaxing, since nothing has to be proven. (\*)

(\*) Translation from Dutch: Cia Tressel

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