Questions for discussion in RIG:

How can theological education be redefined against the background of 'RE as soul-care'? How can we educate RE teachers for 'soul-care'? Is this a valid perspective for RE? Should we rethink our teaching procedures for RE teachers (cfr. the experience with the summer academy 'Seeking Sense in the City'?)

Mapping the Roads of Transcendence
Religious Education in a Multicultural Society

Bert Roebben & Leo van der Tuin

In this paper we offer the reader the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the research of the religious education (RE) department of Tilburg University. Thereby we focus on the dynamics of inter-religious learning in the Dutch secondary school. After reflecting on empirical data (par. 1) we present a concept of RE that is school-based, child-centered and theology-proof (par. 2). We will also formulate the boundaries of this popular concept. In the permanent redefinition of RE within the accelerating complexity of a postmodern culture of religious inarticulateness, new challenges are rising vis-à-vis educational and theological theory (see also Geerinck 2004 and her contribution in this volume). In the final section of this paper (par. 3) we therefore open the windows of the classroom for a renewed theological perspective on RE that requires careful observation: RE as soul-care.[1]

1. Empirical data on youth and their perspectives on life and religion

As part of a larger European research program with the title 'Religious Attitudes and Life Perspectives', located at the University of Würzburg in Germany (Ziebertz, Kalbheim & Riegel 2003), we did a survey with Dutch secondary school students in Roman-Catholic private schools (age 15-18, n = 816), on the function and meaning of religion in their lives. Several aspects were asked for: the meaning of life, the qualification of this meaning, modernity and religion/church, religion and society, religious plurality, xenophobia and the image of God. In a survey with closed questions like this one, it is relatively easy to indicate the relation between traditional forms of faith and the life of young people. It is much more difficult to find out how they dismantle existing forms and patterns of faith and re-appropriate them in new styles of meaning. For further research we therefore decided to go deeper into the factor analyses to see whether or not there is coherence between different particular world views and religious patterns in individual life projects. For the time being we present in this paper some of the tentative figures and findings. We focus on three questions: What life perspectives do young people actually have? How do they relate to other world views and religions in the Dutch society? How do create content and coherence in their life projects, based on the different assumptions of world views and religions? For this latter issue we focus on their God images. We start with presenting some background information.

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[1] This will be the link with the new research program of the RE department for the coming years (2005-2009). In default of space we leave other actual research items out of consideration: RE and environmental issues (van der Tuin 1999, 2003a), youth and young adult ministry (Roebben 2001b, 2003c, 2004b), Christian school identity and pastoral care (Roebben 2001c, 2003a) and the organisation of theological education (Roebben 2003b).

Background variables

Item	Percentage
Boys	43%
Girls	57%
Church member	62% says 'I am'
Baptism	68%
Confirmation	54%
Church attendance	47% says never, 8 % says more or less regularly
Believing person	28% says 'I am'
Religious person	15% says 'I am'
Religious socialisation	19% of the fathers, 21% of the mothers say that it is important that faith is handed over

Table 1 – Background variables

The image is clear: although many of them still are a member of the (Roman-Catholic) church, the relation of adolescents with traditional church and institutionalized faith is very weak. Most of the parents find religious socialization at home not important, at least that is the assessment of their children.

Life perspectives

How do these young people look at the past, the present and the future? Are they pessimistic or rather confident? In the latest report of the Dutch 'Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau' [Social and Cultural Planning Agency] individuals indicate that they are confident about the future for themselves, but rather pessimistic about the future for society as a whole.

Concept	Scale	Score
Future-passive	Future	3.47
Future-active	Planning	3.45
Past-passive	Pessimism	3.32
Past-active	Securing	3.30
Past-active/passive	Nostalgia	2.95
Present-active/passive	Uncertainty	2.82
Present-active	Present	2.61

Table 2 – Outlook on life (5-point scale: answers mean 1=negative agree, 3=middle, 5=positive agree)

The future is not foreseeable and will be different from what young people think (Future). But they are confident and they will be prepared and flexible enough to cope with it (Planning). The future will not depend on their choices; they rather believe that they will need to be able to adapt their choices to what the future brings. The present is their leading intuition. This is also true for their evaluation of the past. They are not so optimistic about their capacity for change (Pessimism), although they do their best to make good choices in the personal realm on the basis of what they learned in the past (Securing). The past is not a source for nostalgia for them; they do not decide to continue to live in nihilism, but opt for pragmatism (see also table 5: 'For me the meaning of life is to make the best out of it'). In other parts of the research becomes clear that traditional religious institutions have lost their plausibility in providing solid grounds for reflecting about what to do in the future. Individualisation and de-traditionalisation go hand in hand in this new pragmatic outlook on life.

Religious plurality

How do young people evaluate the presence of other world views and religions in their neighbourhood? How do these function in their pragmatic life perspective?

Position	Score
Positive ('It is good that we encounter so many different world views in our society')	3.22
Negative ('The many religious world views in our country cause unrest and tension')	3.03
Neutral ('It really doesn't matter that there are so many religions in our country')	3.09

Table 3 – Religious plurality (5-point scale: answers mean 1=negative agree, 3=middle, 5=positive agree)

The three positions are close to one another, although the positive position scores a little bit higher than the negative one. Young people indicate that the presence of others helps them at least to think about different life options, which can be an enriching experience. At the same time one can observe the presence of a negative and indifferent position: 'Every person can decide for him or herself what to believe in'. This tolerance can create a certain confusion on the societal level.

The next issue is referring to the relations between different religions. Is there cohesion in the eyes of young people? Do they have a common ground, a common goal? Are they identical ways to salvation for the human person and the world?

Concept	Score
Multi-religious	3.10
Inter-religious	2.68
Mono-religious	2.45
Confessional-religious	2.29

Table 4 – Multi-religiousness (5-point scale: answers mean 1=negative agree, 3=middle, 5=positive agree)

The concept of multi-religiousness is the only one that scores relatively high. Young people give the impression that there is much more in common between different world views and religions than what divides them. This is for them the basis for solving contradictions and stopping conflicts. Religious tolerance is an important good. At least on the personal level; on the societal level other parts of the research bear evidence to a certain feeling of (religious) xenophobia, but this is significantly and exclusively linked to criminal actions of foreigners.

Content and coherence of life project

How or on the basis of what kind of assumptions do young people create content and coherence for their life project? We already concluded that the present is their leading intuition and the future is their private pragmatic project for which they are confident. But what is their inspiration? For the answer on this question we focus on their God images: how do they see the relation between God and world? We presented them the traditional conceptions and carefully observed the sort of choices they make and coherences they create.

Conception	Score
1 Nihilism *"In my opinion, life is meaningless"*	2.06
2 Pantheism *"God is inside everything, God is everything"*	2.47
3 Christian *"God for me is the God of the Bible"*	2.52
4 Immanence *"The divine is something in our deepest self"*	2.55

5 Humanism *"God is another expression for the good in humankind"*	2.57
6 Deism *"The world is based on an organising power"*	2.70
7 Atheism *"Believing in God is nonsense"*	2.71
8 Criticism of religion *"The word God is still being used to deceive people"*	2.73
9 Cosmology *"We all participate in the higher reality of the cosmos"*	2.81
10 Metatheism *"God or the divine cannot be described in words"*	3.06
11 Naturalism *"Life is just a part of nature's development"*	3.19
12 Agnostic *"It is a great question if God exists or not"*	3.38
13 Religious universalism *"One God is given different names by the religions"*	3.43
14 Pragmatism *"For me the meaning of life is to make the best out of it"*	4.15

Table 5 – Conception of the relationship between God and world (5-point scale: answers mean 1=negative agree, 3=middle, 5=positive agree)

The first striking evidence is that these adolescents do not think nihilistic. There is a meaning of life, that you can find and 'give' to your life project (see significant high score for pragmatism). For the rest, these scores are completely open for interpretation. Young people seem to give the impression that they do not dare to engage in this discussion. "Wait and see", seems to be their answer.

In order to find out whether or not these adolescents are eclectic and putting together different and contradictory conceptions on God and world, we did a principal component analysis on the fourteen conceptions. When we look at the factor charges >.500 we can see that one particular new factor comes to the fore. On this factor different items are charged that come from the Christian (4 items), the Humanistic (2), the Deistic (1), the Immanentistic (3), the Metatheistic (1) and the Pantheistic (3) conceptions. At least the Christian, Immanentistic and Pantheistic conception merge significantly together. This means that adolescents, if they have a clear view on the relation God-world (and this doesn't mean that they all have such a view, if they already have a view at all!), their conception will be something like: 'The God of the Bible, who unites all parts of humankind and the world, lives in our deepest self. He is personally concerned about every person, who is a part of God. God is inside everything and God is everything'. This image reflects the yearning of the modern human being who wants to be secure in him or herself and being part of a larger unity, which is not abstract and which is in permanent relation with the world we shape.

2. Inter-religious learning in the classroom

On the basis of the empirical research three important lines can be discerned: (1) young people have a relatively optimistic life perspective and are pragmatic in the construction of their world view; (2) they are relatively welcoming other (religious) world views in this construction, although they are at the same time indifferent and convinced that every human being should have the chance to belief what he/she prefers to; (3) they use the building blocks of different conceptions and patterns of meaning to shape their own beliefs. In other more poetic words: action takes over from reflection, today from tomorrow. Annexing religious and other traditions as a toolkit of symbols is a normal procedure, open to anybody. And the building-schemes of this construction can only be made after the building has been completed (Janssen 2003, van der Tuin 2003b).

Responsibility of school and RE

The modern school is responding to its juvenile audience and opens up literally its learning

space for a solid reflection on these complex and multi-layered processes of meaning giving. Modern curricula are based on and referring to this situation. Students are offered the opportunity to identify, describe and clarify their concerns about their living environment. Learning to deal constructively with differences is part of this 'powerful learning environment', all the more because the dialogue with other belief systems and convictions takes place not only in the depth of time (intergenerational), but also in the breath of space (intercultural) and against the horizon of the future (global). The actual presence of people from other cultures (via migration and asylum), the large mobility of people and services, the supply of the media, etcetera, make that our living environment is in an ongoing state of cross-fertilisation. This process repaints our ways of life and our world views, it arouses challenges and tensions in coexistence and hence in the education of future generations. Values education, education for citizenship, personal and social training and all sorts of spiritual training are the answers of the modern school to this development. Differences are not evaded, but examined in their directness and power of interpellation and tested for their ability to promote humanity. Threatening and closed-minded concepts of the good live are brought under critique and dismantled from their fanatic and fundamentalist potential. This description of the modern school is helpful for many teachers, school principles and boards (Lombaerts 1997), sometimes as a reflection for reality, mostly as an ideal.

In this perspective RE has an important contribution to make, by providing students with clarity on the moral and religious dimensions of this living and learning environment. Or, adolescents can no longer rely on clear cut convictions and rituals from their childhood, because religious socialisation is lacking. They are rather free floating in a world of socially accepted diversity and individualisation. A linear-chronological interpretation of moral and religious development (from initiation as a child into a univocal world towards the construction of an equally univocal position as an adult) is no longer appropriate to describe the processes of 'interactive meaning giving' in which youngsters grow up today. In these circumstances the hermeneutic task of RE is accelerated. Cultures and religions have never existed in a chemically pure condition, but today the weight of plurality breaks right through the safe initiation boundaries and compel young people and their educators into heightened 'hermeneutic awareness' (Haste 1996, 53). The young person who wants to know his/her stance, must consciously go into the many voices that resound in his/her narrative identity and engage him/herself in the larger discourse with fellow narrative identities. RE with its specific practices, policies and theories has adapted itself to this situation. New approaches have seen the light since: the interpretive (Jackson 1997 & 2004), the hermeneutic-communicative (Lombaerts & Roebben 2000, Maex 2003, Lombaerts & Pollefeyt 2004), the abductive-correlational (Ziebertz, Heil & Prokopf 2003) and the social-constructivist (Hermans 2003), to mention only a few in Western-Europe.

The dynamics of inter-religious learning

Modern schools and their RE courses are challenged to show the courage of their convictions. They experience a permanent appeal to their 'response-ability', to their readiness and capacity to respond to the complex quests for meaning in adolescence and young adulthood. Modern RE represents alternative roads to this quest, through the life stories of others who dealt creatively with it. Modern RE is not 'giving meaning', but challenges youngsters to 'discover meaning', by providing them with detours or road diversions. The concept of 'detour' is devised by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur and turns out to be very fruitful for RE (see Streib 1998, Maex 2003). It refers to 'thought experiments' (via literature, film, theatre, museum or church visit) that challenge young people to reconsider their own story or

narrative identity from a perspective that is not actually given in their mind, but which could function as an eye-opener ('It could as well be otherwise'). That confrontation is always surprising ('I have never seen it that way before'), but never alienating, because it does not annihilate the preceding knowledge of the person but reframes it.

Inter-religious learning is in this respect a modality of intensive RE. It deepens in a structural way the hermeneutic dynamic of RE by a communicative exchange between students in the classroom. The other is then no longer the generalised other (the master narrative, the classical text or the great tradition), but the actual other, sitting next to me in the classroom (the small narrative, the 'text' of my fellow student, the tradition in his/her own mind). Inter-religious learning takes place, in the first instance, not between representatives of ideological groups from an outsider perspective, but rather in the inner dynamics of the quest for meaning of young people, in communication with other young people (Streib 2001). The empirical research in paragraph 1 is bearing evidence to the fact that, although youngsters are rather critical to the broader role of religion in society, they do admit that there is a strong presence of other religious world views in their direct neighbourhood (school mates, peer group, sports friends, television programs, etcetera) and they evaluate this presence in a relatively positive way: "It enables you to reflect better on such matters (…). Other (religious) convictions can cause distress to society, but for me personally they are a challenge".

The threefold distinction between mono-religious (learning *in* religion), multi-religious (learning *about* religion) and inter-religious learning (learning *from* religion), based on the work of the British religious educationalist Michael Grimmitt, has become common property in the field of RE (Ziebertz 1993 & 2002, Roebben 2000, Sterkens 2001). The *mono-religious* model aims intentionally to immerse young people in the dynamics of a particular tradition and render them full-fledged participants of that tradition. The *multi-religious* model assumes that young people can be introduced simultaneously or successively to various religious traditions and world views, since they have no specific affinity with one or the other tradition and can thus decide for themselves purely on the basis of this information. The *inter-religious* model invites students to overcome indifference, to leave the outsider position and to commit themselves as searching insiders (however beginner-like, vulnerable and provisional they may be) to the dialogue on the religious issue at stake. They discover their own moral and religious narrative identity "not only with their own eyes, but also with the eyes of the other, in another religious frame" (Streib 2001, 140). They are challenged to analyse and communicate their religious position in four domains: as story, morality, community and ritual. In these four domains, the internal-argumentative interpellation power of religions and world views is investigated and tested in one's own life and brought before conversation partners for investigation and testing in an ongoing play of perspective change. Without this commitment RE runs the risk of degenerating young people into a sort of religious tourists who put themselves through the anecdotic, exotic, adventurous and the 'kick-generating' dimensions of religions and worldviews. Differences between traditions become flattened out and depoliticised, and their critical potential for mapping the road of transcendence vanishes away.

How much difference and divergence can a post-modern student cope with? 'How far can one walk in the moccasins of another?' (Heimbrock, quoted in Streib 2001, 140). How do young people (and not only young people!) deal with theological incompatibility (for example, resurrection versus reincarnation)? Their 'personal level of constructivism' is very high (according to the empirical research, see paragraph 1), but how far can they go to remain happy and convivial? There is a thin line between positive divergent thinking at the one hand

and indifference or fundamentalism at the other. Non-communication due to non-understanding, due to a lack of mutuality and confidence, due to a lack of translatability or commensurability forms the shady side of inter-religious learning with its optimistic anthropology (see Van der Ven 1998, 273).The actual spontaneous multicultural sensitivity of young people however, who express themselves in world music festivals, international exchange, root- and folk-music and folk-culture, etcetera, is pointing in the direction of a positive development. Many young people seem to recognise multi-vocality in their own life, and seem to integrate and celebrate it as a source of spontaneous vitality.

If RE no longer takes place in a storm-free zone and if the interaction with the world criss-crosses more than ever before one's own life project, then the inter-religious model offers the best chance for success. This model implies however a good pragmatic knowledge of the religious backgrounds of other conversation partners, so that there is no place for prejudice and misunderstanding. The inter-religious perspective therefore *includes* rather than *excludes* the other two perspectives. According to our assessment, 'learning from religion' is the matrix within which factual knowledge about other religions and worldviews is the basis ('learning about religion'), with a view towards an own appropriated – however incomplete and tentative – religious synthesis of the student ('learning in religion').

3. A new educational and theological direction: RE as soul-care

The RE model presented in paragraph 2 is promising and popular. It is school-based, child-centered and theology-proof. Let us explain: it does justice to the development of the last twenty years in the scholarly field of school didactics in which a powerful learning environment is conceptualised and created on the basis of the initial situation of the learner, in the midst of a school that is a micro-cosmos, the splendid training ground to acquire the necessary skills for the 'heavy' work in society. It is focusing on the child as 'meaning giver', the one who reconstructs his or her own moral and religious viewpoint out of different alternatives present in the actual and in the virtual classroom (through resources of 'old' and new media). And this model turns out to be also theology-proof – just like a watch is shock-proof. Religious stories, moral systems, communities and rituals are overtly discussed in the classroom, made public and then domesticated, so that they cannot become too shocking, subversive or ironic in the life of future human beings.

The question however is, whether adolescents learn to discern and appreciate the specific character of the religious experience – behind the different worldviews and religious traditions that are discussed and deliberated upon in the classroom. Is there a place where they can display the answers they have found and can place them in line or in opposition with the narratives and figures of tradition, as if these discovered answers were a 'new' tradition? For those who are hungry, a simple explanation of the digestive system will not be satisfying. What they want is nourishment. What vocabulary do schools and RE practice in the end, when they encounter yearning youth? What kind of soul-food do they have to offer? The critical reply to these questions lies in the assumption that the sources and resources of religious traditions can be opened and reshaped for new spiritual experiences of students, the assumption that the cognitive action (e.g. of inter-religious learning) can also permeate the soul of the learner.

A merely hermeneutical approach, in combination with a communicative dynamic in the classroom, does not necessarily result in 'religious learning', because the latter means more than understanding, grasping and appropriating religious contents from different contexts in

one's own biography. Why? Because particular elements in the inter-religious exchange situation of the classroom sometimes can be non-accessible and remain radically foreign to the learner (Streib 2001, 141). Because one can run into the inner contradictions and fallibilities of one's own belief system, when one is confronted with other belief systems (Alexander 1995). Because one can even become in a sense jealous about the attractiveness and goodness of the other person's belief system – this is what Mary Boys calls 'holy envy' (2000, 276) – "experiencing something so profound that one wishes his or her own community of faith also had or practiced it". This can cause deep frictions within the narrative identity, or we should say on a deeper level, within the human soul.

Can RE mediate the core experience of religion, namely that no human enterprise (not even RE, not even religion itself) is able to clarify all the ambivalences of the human soul and to grasp the ultimate meaning of life? Constructing a solid and contingency controlling world view or religion in a syncretistic, irreverent and functional way, just in order to be 'saved' from all the unpleasant questions of daily life, can be a splendid game in a 'new age', but it does not solve the ultimate experience of homelessness in this age. This seems to be the central question these days: how can I be at home on the road? How can religion help me in not helping myself, of keeping me open and confident for the opportunities that occur on the road? Religion is utilized by young people (and by their teachers at school) for reconstructing an own view on salvation. This is reality (see paragraph 1). But it is in contradiction to an important characteristic of religion in general: religion shall not be utilized, that is not what it is for. Religion is gratuitous, something that indeed confirms human deliberations, but transcends, questions and challenges them as well (Roebben 2003c). A pragmatic life project, filled in and made coherent with and supported by different religious conceptions and images, can be helpful to survive complexity in a misty future, but is at least from a theological point of view questionable. Or is there another form of religion emerging? Contemporary RE is without any doubt struggling with this issue.

Inter-religious learning as an intensive mode of RE helps young people to find their place in a complex societal network of morally and religiously loaded opinions and actions. The teacher is a guide in the process and helps the student to organise his or her existential environment in a 'hygienic' way. This teacher risks however to be a straw man on the field, in the middle of many religious fires burning around the place. He will suggest that you can warm yourself to whatever fire, but he will only be able to explain how the soul can be warmed by religion in general, by witnessing of his own 'fire experiences' in particular, of how he was 'found' within his own 'searching process', of how he became 'burning inside' in and through the encounter with fire places 'out there' and how he became a full human being in this encounter.

Let us conclude with some remarks for further research. Could it be this way that, through the functional nature of modern RE young people manage to break into more substantial elements that the school system and the teacher no longer thought to be possible? In other words: if one invites young people from the inside of a particular story to enter in dialogue with the religious experience behind the story, is that a purely catechetical pursuit – in the sense of an invitation to a profession of faith? Catechesis presumes pre-catechesis, and that is absent in this case, because young people are lacking religious socialisation (Roebben 2004a, 224-225). The fear of leading them into dangerous 'burning fields' is our fear. No worry, adolescents are clever enough to call a halt when things go too fast. To decongeal stories, to liquify them and to discover the key religious experiences behind them (Roebben 2002 & 2004, 228-230; in German: 'Elementarisierung', Roebben 2001a, 261-268), is for most adolescents completely

new. This turns RE upside down. RE then listens carefully with young people to the stories (even within an inter-religious encounter), it leads them into the human quest for meaning behind these stories (mystagogical-communicative versus hermeneutic-communicative), it builds on the 'infinite openness' (Karl Rahner) for ultimate meaning that is transcending the human person. This RE is radically subversive and ironic. We conclude with Milan Kundera, the famous Czech novelist: "Irony irritates, not because it attacks and mocks, but because it deprives us of our certainties by unveiling the real ambiguity of the world" (quoted in Meijer 1990-1991, 93) – even of the world of RE and religion.

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