

Pre Scriptum

Please feel free to debate on the issues raised in this paper. The text will be published officially on the website of the “Seeking Sense in the City” research project (on www.kub.nl/theologie/ssinc) at the beginning of November). Please do not distribute this paper before official publication. I am looking forward to your feedback. I apologize for not attending the conference in Minneapolis.

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“SEEKING SENSE IN THE CITY” RELIGIOUS EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN AN URBAN AND MULTI-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

- **Definition of the problem**

One of the central questions which religious educators of today face, is: what kind of religious-educational leadership is needed to set young people and young adults into motion to adequately perceive and critically clarify their own religious situation, and to transform it into wholesome actions? One can say with some confidence that this leadership needs to be comprehensive, integrative and sensible (in the double meaning of the Latin *comprehendere*: embrace and understand). It will question but also affirm young people, present certainties but also raise doubts. It will need to be internally relevant to a personal religious story but also deal with that story critically. It will need to, within the tension of tradition and context, take its bearings according to the intrinsic intelligence of the tradition in relation to the context. This leadership will need to fulfil a new type of authority, whereby young people are not regarded as house guests (who are welcomed but nonetheless should know their place), but take part in decision-making about the content and thrust of the discourse as real family members (Warren 1999, 75). This process of re-sourcing will also not leave Christian theology untouched. The new didactic of religious learning at school in particular, the modern hermeneutic-communicative form of religious education in general, and the fact that young generations will rediscover and re-appropriate the Christian religion and other individual religious experiences from a de-traditionalised and modernised dynamics of life, challenge Christian theology to thoroughly reconsider its own starting points and standpoints (Roebben 2001a; 2001b).

- **Objective of the research**

The twofold objective of this encompassing research project can be described as follows. First, we establish how the radical transformation of the learning environment of young people and young adults in a modernising society has also fundamentally influenced and modified their moral and religious learning processes. In the second instance, we examine which innovative issues can be perceived in and realised by religious education of young people and young adults in this process of transformation. The variables which are of decisive importance in this research

– and which influence the process of transformation as well as the learning process ensuing from it, are urbanity and multi-religious stratification of the modern society.

- **Central lines of argumentation**

Religion in a context of modernisation

The Western European society today stands under the pressure of modernisation. This is a development with deep historical roots. The outcome of this development hitherto is a de-traditionalisation concerning frameworks of values and meanings, leaving people to their own device to provide their life with meaning (Gabriel 1994). The supply of the worldview market is large, there is no shortage of religion and worldview. However, people need to steer their own course in making accountable choices within this supply. Since the Enlightenment, institutionalised religious traditions have increasingly been losing their orienting role in the process of moral and religious symbolisation. A systematic remedy of the situation by re-confessionalisation and pillarisation in Flanders and the Netherlands (especially palpable in the educational and social service sectors in the 19th and 20th centuries) has been unable to turn this tide. Increasingly Flanders and the Netherlands are becoming secularised, a trend confirmed by research in sociology of religion (Dekker, de Hart & Peters 1997; Dobbelaere, Elchardus & Kerkhofs 2000). Hand in hand with this deconfessionalisation, de-traditionalisation accelerates only further and faster than before. Institutionalised religious traditions have lost their “good grounds” in helping to access a religious option in questions of life and/or in transmitting the faith. They are contending with a plausibility problem (Boeve 1999). This occurs in the current church related sacramental catechesis (De Lange & Roebben 1999), but also in the more removed areas of religious socialisation, such as religious education in the family (Roebben 1996; Maas & Ziebertz 1997) and religious education at school (Lombaerts & Roebben 2000). Religion has become a private matter; it can (almost) no longer be brought up for discussion in the public. One speaks of a crisis of tradition. The process of religious *tradere* (Latin for handing down) has itself become problematic, sometimes even collapsing. The relation of faith and living is marked by a weak correlation (Boschki 1998), sometimes even by a breakdown in correlation. Young people wonder pityingly: “What are the religious people actually talking about? What are they fussing over about?” Attempts of theology to restore the plausibility of a religious vision of the reality share in the same crisis experienced by institutionalised religious traditions. Even in the reflexive domain the crisis of tradition is present.

This is only one side of the coin. The question is whether with this secularisation perspective all is said about the moral and religious situation of today (Gabriel & Hobelsberger, 1994; Ziebertz, 1999). This appearance is deceptive, upon closer scrutiny. Despite the fact that churches have lost their claim to public life and are now as a result of functional differentiation attempting to survive in the margin alongside the supply of numerous other meaning-yielding domains of life (such as work, relaxation, relations, education, economy, etc.), contemporaries remain active in their search for religious meanings. The market place in this post-modern time attracts a variegated multitude of enthusiastic and curious individuals. Many experience the need for a moral and religious perspective for their questions of life, on the condition that the supply is flexible and non-committal and that they themselves can determine, as it were, whether and how much religion they take home from the market. The new media reinforce this individualised vision of values, norms and meanings (Roebben, 1999a). It is this religious modernisation perspective that is currently pressing ahead in the scientific grey-areas of pedagogy and theology in general and of pedagogy of religion in particular.

This research is extraordinarily fascinating because it is full of paradoxes. Why do even self-assured, late-modern individuals continue, during the creation of their life-project, to look to the sideline, where religions and religious institutions loiter? Perhaps for two reasons: they are searching for the building blocks of their individualised project of meaning-searching and for the unconditional support whenever this project threatens to overtax them. People of today want to be free, but they *must* also be free. The rationale of our time requires that people be independent and original in life. Belonging to this also is a flexible and eclectic way of dealing with a multitude of religious perspectives. But this *rationality* is often at the cost of *relationality*; people have the inclination to yield to oneself in this quest. The paradox of modernisation is that people must be free and original and have only oneself as compass towards that aim. Modernity awakens the pledge of a new global connectedness, but seems unable to fulfil this. On the contrary, it contributes to an increasingly widespread erosion of the communal (Mette 1999, 86-89; Roebben 1995, 81-121). Religions have something special to offer on this point: they point to forms of unconditional connectedness and communal experience that transcend the worries of the toilsome day-to-day work in the late modernity. They offer also solace whenever the secular world becomes too suffocating and demanding, whenever the ideal of “fixability” shatters against the contingencies of existence (Gabriel 1994, 81-85). The attitude of contemporaries with respect to religion is thus extremely ambiguous and functional. Churches find themselves therefore forever in the temptation to exploit this new receptivity, and to accordingly steer people back to the church.

The religious situation of young people and young adults

Young people especially seem creative in handling the paradoxes of the late-modern juncture of time. Most of them like to experiment with questions of life and with the answers on hand. With respect to the adult world they demonstrate a procrastinating behaviour, they immerse themselves so long as possible in their own sub-culture and try to be original and independent within it, no follower but representative of a unique style (Alma & Janssen 2000). Furthermore, the so-called “style-surfing” offers youngsters the opportunity to switch easily from one sub-culture to the other with their eye on the creation of a personal and unique style. Religious language games are also in stock from which people can freely choose in order to compose their own patchwork identity. Religious syncretism (Ziebertz 1999, 45-51), *bricolage* (de Hart 1992), off-road religions (Streib 1998) and “wild devotion” are only a few concepts which are used in today’s sociology of religion to designate this process of transformation.

It is especially the identity-forming aspect in religion that concerns young people. But does it also offer them insight and solace when life is wounded, with experiences of contingency, etc.? And can it also offer them a global overview or a spiritual footing in their long-drawn-out youth biography (Roebben 1997)? Do they *then* expect also flexibility or do they hope rather to obtain from religion a fixed, sustaining standpoint? Research on the functionality of religion in youth cultures is sparse or non-existent. There are especially studies available that examine from a secularisation perspective the loss of institutional church-related religious experience and institutional accountability among the young generations. However, how young people themselves attempt to give meaning to what they undertake against the backdrop of a modernising society, and how religious traditions are helpful in the process, are research questions that are as yet little explored. Towards that aim new and “unorthodox” (van der Ven 1995, 361) religious youth research is needed (e.g. Porzelt 1999), which must itself be evaluated in its validity. This is perhaps because adult researchers read too little “new” results in their research on the loss of religious perspective in the life of young people; but it can also be that

they are too eager and hope to read too much of a possible conclusion of the so-called religious revival among young people. Hidden among this adult interest could be a masked form of religious domestication which young people appreciate the least.

Churches, Christian identity and religious education

At least this much can be said from a theological perspective: young people and young adults no longer answer to a project of faith which they cannot personally appropriate as their own. With this situation the church is not without its qualms. Reflexive distancing of individuals seems to decrease or even dissolve the collective and institutional religious educational powers of religion (Dressler, 1998, 395). People call this the *Bildungsdilemma* of the church: in its original charter it indeed holds up a mature and critical religion as its objective, but it does not know how it can give the personalised and laicised perspective of belief a place in its own structures. The result is that many drift away from the churches and go their own way in the search for meaning. A movement of religiosity arises subsequently outside the church. The church then seems no longer *religiös integrationsfähig*, it can apparently not address people meaningfully and integratedly in relation to their belief situation (Drehse 1994, 41-65). This is a tragic situation for well-meaning church people: they find many individual contemporaries becoming religiously “homeless”. And yet they must on the other hand look on how the church management continues to assume the idea that this homelessness can be changed by gathering collectivity under a churchly confessional roof.

The situation is complex. Churches give answers to questions which contemporaries experience as alien and they do not have the answers prepared for questions which contemporaries themselves pose insistently. There is quite some obscurity and there are quite a lot tensions to be seen in the religious field of today, there is much syncretism and “dangerous” (read: dehumanised) religion. On the other hand, it is so that most young people and young adults manage themselves best in this terrain. They do not ask to be snuffed by the church during the creation of their moral and religious project of searching for meaning. They are particularly sensitive to every domesticating movement from church or religion. What they especially want are thrust and challenge, insights and attitudes which enrich and further guide their own searching (Hendriks 1999).

New roads to challenge young people to more sharply and authentically formulate their life-project are urgently demanded (Roebben 1995, 235-238). The churches need not take on a monopoly position with regard to moral and religious formation. They do need, however, to present themselves relevantly and transparently in the social discourse. That can be from a “counter story” perspective or from an adaptive strategy. More fruitful seems to us to be the third road, namely, that of confrontation (Roebben 1999b, 57-58): to invite young people to catch a glimpse of the sacred through the *nartex*, the front portico of the church, on the in-between space of Christian religion and the world, between Christian tradition and *Alltagsreligion* (daily lived religious practices). People want “transitional spaces” and “border communities” (M. Hess, cited in Roebben 1999a, 88-89), they have a need for *Passagebedürfnis* (room for passage) (A. Grozinger, cited in De Lange & Roebben 1999, 219-220), in order to dwell on the expansibility of their own story in relation to the master narratives. These narratives are not extinct. They come again to life, in a modest and purified manner, among other things, in the front porticoes of churches. The *narthex* of the church is the meeting space in which life stories can resound between people and in which the question about the various levels of life is thematised, not from a vague religious non-committalness, but from a clearly perceivable and at the same time communicable Christian perspective which “brings about experiencing, thinking and doing”. That

this encounter takes place in a multicultural and multi-religious society renders religious education of today all the more exciting (Roebben 2000b; 2000c).

Towards a new comprehensive concept of religious educational leadership

The point of this research design lies in the strained relation between a sociologically determinable decrease in impact of institutionalised religious traditions on the one hand (secularisation) and a growth of undifferentiated religious individualisation and pluralisation on the other hand (modernisation). This can be considered as a powerful starting point for religious education. That churches become empty and no longer offer shelter for young people and young adults while people hanker in their lucid moments for a religious shelter over their head, is a peculiar and instructive paradox. It is our conviction that young people are entitled to identity-clarification in this confusing environment. They are entitled to such information, ready and clear backgrounds to the multi-religious nature of values, norms and meanings in a modern society. They also have the right to explicit opportunities of interaction with their peers, to objectified confrontations with religious cultures and to a well-supported communication about all this, precisely to learn to anticipatively deal with new developments. The tensions which religion and worldview land in, belong themselves to the “teaching material” of religious education. This is an ambitious undertaking, as the question remains whether upbringing, education and formative work are capable to break open the crisis of tradition of religions and to examine this event meaningfully and prudently with an eye on the identity-clarification of young people.

The recent theoretical reflections on religious education fit in with this new development. From the historical aspect the following can be said (Pajer 1993): after a long period of kerymatic instruction whereby the transfer of religious message stood central in Western-Europe, a time followed (in the period after Vaticanum II, at the dawn of the seventies) in which it was endeavoured to make this religious message palatable for young people and to clarify it in a secularised society. Biblical and ecclesiastical themes were translated in light of questions of life and societal issues and “adapted” to the palate and the integrative capacity of the young people. The correlational didactic which attempted to build a bridge between revelation and experience and the catechesis of experience celebrated high time in the period of the seventies and eighties. This was possible because most young people still had (vaguely) an idea of their religious socialisation at home or elsewhere. This optimistic translational didactic has now radically made room for a new vision: the space in which young people (often without knowing their religious origin) search interactively with ease for answers to questions of life and “make use of” religions and churches in the process, forms itself a powerful learning environment for religious learning. Young people often no longer know what institutional religions are about while they are in the meantime preoccupied with their search for meaning. Questions and answers seem to exclude each other. Such conflicts are hermeneutic junctions; they form the point of departure for hermeneutic learning processes. Our option is therefore fundamentally educational: the situation of de-traditionalisation and modernisation needs to become a powerful learning environment in which young people receive clarity about who they are and where they want to head to. Driven by the dynamics of their own identity-clarification, young people need to be invited at school, in youth work and in permanent education to engage communicatively with their peers regarding the questions of life which they are confronted with and to which (institutional) religious traditions offer meaningful fragments of answers (Lombaerts & Roebben 2000; Mette 2001).

The fundamental starting point of a whole bunch of contemporary educational innovations is the self-guiding, self-developing and ongoing learning of young people and young adults. The underlying vision is the following: in the context of a modernising society, social agility is

increasingly demanded of young people – a sort of mental resilience with which one ingeniously engages in the strongly individualised and pluralistic dimensions of living and coexisting. This implies also the accelerated development of new moral and religious competencies in young people and young adults. Anyone who thinks, works and studies in and about a modern culture and society, cannot evade the question of how people can responsibly and meaningfully deal with personal initiative, radical plurality and the need of social cohesion. This question is all the more significant with the consideration of the growing presence of young people in an urban context and the increasingly multi-religious colouring of that context. What does this transformation mean for the hitherto prevailing models of religious formation at school? And how are religious communities challenged by the dynamics of modernisation to put their “intrinsic intelligibility” to the service of the self-guiding and self-developing moral and religious learning of young people and young adults? An interesting adjunctive theological question is: how does the own “tradition” of religious communities change in this transformation of the learning environment?

- **Methodology**

Practical theology is a welcoming help in this research. Specialising in questions of religious education, it can mediate between pedagogy and theology. The material object of practical theology are the religious practices of the contemporaries, in our case insofar they can be related to learning situations (in education, youth work and permanent formation). Its formal object has to do with the methodology: practical theology attempts to acquire insight into these religious practices, in light of an empirical, hermeneutic and/or ideologically critical and religiously analytical instrumentation (Ziebertz 2000, 33-34). Explanation, understanding and change are the three methodological approaches of practical-theological research. Traditionally religious education forms a special entry to theology: it brings concrete questions from *sensus fidelium* to theological undertaking (Roebben & Warren 2001). It urges theology as it were to better understand itself, on the basis of an empirical explanation of facts and with an eye on change in continuously varying and new religious contexts. In this capacity (and certainly in a time in which the collective-institutional comes under the pressure of individualisation and pluralisation), the research of religious education is an excellent concretisation of what practical theology aims to do with respect to theology: to confront it with the context in which religious tradition(s) can be rethought and revitalised (Schmidt 1987; Grab 1989; Schweiter 1991; Kubera 1999).

- **Research design**

In this encompassing research frame four aspects are investigated. The first and fourth project are inclusive: the starting situation of young people to religious education in the contemporary Dutch secondary school is analysed and related to the chances and boundaries of post-school religious formation of young adults. The projects two and three are linked as well: they are aiming at insight in the two independent variables, urbanity and multiculturalism of modern societies

- Research of the religious dialectical starting point among young people in Dutch secondary schools
- The city as theological metaphor – breeding place for new forms of religious education
- Interreligious learning as educational concept for the future
- Ongoing formation of young adults in moral and religious perspective

Sub-project 1

In this research component the strained relation between religious dialectical starting point of young people, religious-educational leadership and Christian narrative tradition is assessed. Ms. Ilse Geerinck is appointed as AIO since the 1st of January 2001 to study this tension in the context of religious education in the “Tweede Fase” of Pre-University Education in the Netherlands. She will develop an instrument on the basis of qualitative-empirical research, which gauges the way in which young people articulate and account for their questions about meaning in tension with elements from their (Christian) religious socialisation. This study has also the objective to obtain a better insight into the role and meaning of the teacher in religion in this process (cfr. Prokopf/Ziebertz 2000; Groome 1991).

Sub-project 2

The urban context strengthens substantially the experiences of pluralisation and individualisation which characterise a modern culture. The city renders the modern culture dynamic: it amplifies people’s feeling of aliveness by representing life on podiums and expositions. It points anticipatively to new perspectives and fault-lines in that feeling. In the city people search for “transitional spaces”, in which they can refer to and connect the multitude of life perspectives by themselves and in communication with others. Religions play in it a crucial role (cf. the project “Preaching for other people’s parish”, in the context of Rotterdam Capital of Culture 2001). A contextual theology allows itself to be challenged by this development and gauges its learning opportunities (Heimbrock 2001; Sedgwick 1995).

Sub-project 3

Interreligious learning is perhaps a task for all sectors of education, schooling and ongoing formation, but it was only recently thematised in the context of the school subject of religion, because of its expressive moral and religious loading. In the Netherlands this subject offers indeed youth the opportunity to explicitly examine by oneself whether they recognise their religious origin, whether they are able to position themselves on the market of worldview and religion, whether they are ready for a personal religious synthesis, etc. With the actual increase in the multicultural and multi-religious character of the Dutch society, “interreligious learning” is to become a pedagogic vision for the future (Roebben 2000b; 2001b) (cfr. Schreijäck 2000; Boys 2000).

Sub-project 4

Especially the identity-formation aspect of religions attracts youngsters and young adults. It offers them a spiritual playground on which moral and existential tensions, connected with their long-drawn-out youth biography, can be explored and thematised (Roebben 1997). What implications does this have for ongoing faith formation? The hermeneutic-communicative form of moral and religious education at school asks for a sequel, if it wants to be effective. What can religious traditions contribute to in this post-formative process? What is their specific language game? How can this game be confronted with the complex spiritual quest of modern young adults? And what kind of mentoring leadership and community is needed for success in this quest? (cfr. Lück & Schweitzer 1999; Daloz Parks 2000).

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