

**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TODAY: BETWEEN JAMES AND
DURKHEIM. IN DIALOGUE WITH CHARLES TAYLOR**

Siebren Miedema

Vrije University Amsterdam

ABSTRACT

How should the social and global horizon of religious education be conceptualised in an age in which religion seems to be fully privatised? Charles Taylor's 2002 book *Varieties of Religion Today. William James Revisited* is a challenge for a philosophy of religious education that has as its constitutive aspects a transformative view on the aim of religious education, a transactionalist and deconstructive ontology, and a view on the interrelatedness of the relatively autonomous public, social and individual domains with respect to religion and religious education. Taylor's analysis makes it inevitable to rethink anew the role and function of tradition for the theory and praxis of religious education.

MARKING OFF THE PROBLEM

How should the social, the public, and global horizon of religious education be conceptualized in an age in which religion seems to be fully privatized?

In an earlier publication in *Religious Education* I followed José Casanova (Casanova 1994) and have criticized the view which states that the public sphere has been fully secularized. I gave arguments for the impact of religion in the public domain. Such contrary to the view that religion has lost its social function and is located primarily in the private sphere. The empirical research done by Casanova and others is very insightful here and shows that in the last decennia of the 20th century the impact of religion on political, economical and cultural areas is enormous. Casanova characterizes this as the *deprivatization of religion* in modern life. So, contrary to the claim of the differentiation thesis that religion has lost its

societal function and has become a system primarily located in the private sphere on the level of individuals and families (the so-called thesis of the privatization of religion), this deprivatization view puts religion back in the public domain and on a global scale. In respect with this insight I then concluded that in this situation all state and denominational schools are challenged to answer the question in what way they are going to prepare students for their encounter with people who are adherents of other belief systems and share in other religious practices.

Although I then briefly referred to growing forms of non-institutionalised, i.e. individualised forms of religiosity, I did not fully reflect on the relation of this process of individualisation with collectives or/and traditions (Miedema 2000). I emphasized, however, the fact that humans are born into a culture which means that the world already has meaning, that the newborns are only able to acquire meaning and to create new meanings by participating in socio-cultural practices, that is by taking part in communities of practice. In formulating my contention that individuation assumes that cultural meanings have to be appropriated and integrated into one's own personality, I did not give enough attention to the necessary reverse side of individuation that is the processes of socialization and looking at the partners involved in the diverse processes and practices. By creating space for students to develop and articulate their personal religious identity from a transformative view on religious identity formation (see for example Wardekker & Miedema 2001, 39-40), it seems as if I have completely forgotten the Deweyan pedagogical underpinning of my own theoretical position in respect with religious education (Miedema 1995). If, according to Dewey, the coordination of the psychological and the social factors is the ultimate problem of education (Dewey 1972, 224), the question is how we should handle in religious education the factor or aspect of connections, traditions or communities today.

In his recent book *Varieties of Religion Today. William James Revisited* that is based on the 1999 Gifford Lectures delivered in Edinburgh, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (Taylor 2002) is precisely dealing with this tension between what he characterizes as expressive individualism and the level of collective connections. His question

focuses on the meaning of religion today. In his book Taylor is pointing to the shifts that have occurred during the 20th century in the relation between religion, society and the individual. His starting point is the classical work of William James (1842-1910) *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1902). A book mostly interpreted as dealing exclusively with the perspective of the religiosity of the individual. Taylor is asking himself what the topicality of James's view is for us at the beginning of the 21st century.

In this essay I will slightly change Taylor's question about the meaning of religion today and will concentrate on the question of the meaning of religious education today. In the remainder of this contribution I will in the first section elaborate on Taylor's issue of the relation between expressive individualism and collective connections *casu quo* the relation between religion, state en society. I will profit here especially from a particular part of his analysis in terms of the theoretical distinctions he is making by relating a Jamesian view respectively to a paleo-Durkheimian, a neo-Durkheimian and a post-Durkheimian view. In the second section I will confront the outcomes of the first section with the hard core elements of the philosophy of religious education as I have worked these out in terms of its transformative aim, its transactionalist and deconstructive ontology, and with respect to religion and religious education from a view on the interrelatedness of the public, the social and the individual domain as relatively autonomous domains within the framework of a differentiated practical-theological three-course model. Confronting Taylor's analysis with the constituents of my own philosophy of religious education makes it inevitable to rethink anew the role and function of tradition(s) for the theory and praxis of religious education. Here I profit from a recent, very insightful publication on pedagogy and tradition by the German philosopher of education, Dietrich Benner. With his threefold conceptualization of the concept 'transmission' a weak spot in my own theoretical framework can be strengthened. The epilogue sums up the aspects of my theoretical learning experience.

EXPRESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVE CONNECTIONS

It is Taylor's contention that James's attention was nearly exclusively focused on the original experience of the individual, on the "feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James 1902, 31). Not religious institutions, traditions and creeds have religiously speaking motivating force for the individual person, but responses to prayers, conversations with the unseen, voices and visions, changes of the heart, deliverances from fear, inflowings of help, as well as assurances of support. Aptly summarizing James's view, Taylor states that for James the real locus of religion is in the individual experience and not in corporate life (Taylor 2002, 7).

This stress on the individual, however, is not only a contemporary 'invention', but has historical antecedents that run from the high Middle Ages with the emphasis on a religion of personal commitment and devotion, via the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, and Western modernity of the end of the 18th century and the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century (James 2002, 9-14; see also Taylor 1989). The fact that James emphasizes that the personal and original or authentic religious experience is the heart of religion, makes it understandable that many people recognize his ideas and insights as relevant and accurate for our days. First by those people who argue that without any personal bound with religion whatsoever one should break with religion or should not meddle with it. At the other hand there is recognition by those people who admit that they are religious but do not want to have any institutional binding with a church, a mosque, or a synagogue. In religious life for them personal experience in terms of strong emotions and its expressions are only decisive.

I will come back at the issue of the individualization of religiosity later, but now I want to outline why Taylor asserts that notwithstanding the topicality of James's view his analysis is insufficient and inadequate to be fully valid for the situation in which we find ourselves nowadays. Firstly, in James's analysis the collective and communal religious life is only dealt with as the derived, second-hand result of the original religious life of some highly gifted individuals, some *religious virtuosi* as Weber

coined them. There is no possibility as it seems for "a collective connection through a common way of being" (Taylor 2002, 24), for instance in the form of the church as a sacramental communion. Secondly, James plays off the individual aspect of religion too strong against, and at the detriment of the collective aspect. This is the reason that the relation between inner religious experience and social embeddedness is neglected. In James's approach the individual domain seems completely detached from the social and the public domain.

Elsewhere (Miedema 2002) I have shown that in general this conclusion is sound. James's psychological perspective leads him to focus on the experience of the individual. However, this does not imply, contrary to Rorty's interpretation (Rorty 1997), any privatization of the religious domain whatsoever. On the contrary, the goal of James's philosophy of psychology, as he explicitly states in several places in the last part of *Varieties*, is to redeem religion from unwholesome privacy and to give public status and universal right to its deliverance (James 1902 [1982], 432, 553, 507). It is also true that he gave primacy to personal religious experience over the institutional side of religion. Nevertheless, this is not to say that he always hold the opinion that institutions do not have meaning or impact. Especially in his later work James we find places on which he is talking a far more balanced position regarding the relation between the individual and social life. For example in his essay 'The One and the Many' James wrote: "Human systems [i.e. institutions, S.M.] evolving in consequence of human needs . . . (can) keep human energy framing as time goes on" (James 1907 [1975], 76, 78). I take his stance here as saying that from an evolutionary perspective both on the individual as well as on an institutional level there is conservation, but also change, renewal and innovation. The notions of accommodation, adaptation and adjustment (see Miedema 1995, 68) can fruitfully be used for both individuals, institutions on the social level as well as for states. It is a right conclusion that James himself as theoretical and empirical psychologist did not elaborate on the interrelation of the two or three levels from an evolutionary point of view.

With his emphasis on the individual aspect of religion, according to Taylor, James in a certain sense anticipated on what Taylor himself has

characterized as the 'expressive individualism' that became manifest since the sixties in the second half of the twentieth century. In this 'culture of authenticity' persons should try and find their own way in the domain of religion instead of being submitted to a model that is imposed from outside by tradition, community or by religious and political authorities (Taylor 1991, 25 ff).

Taylor does fully acknowledge the strong individualized nature of the spiritual way individuals are going today, but he is very doubtful whether this means that any relation with religious communities is completely missing. Besides, he has doubts about the view that says that in relation to religion there is no relation with the public and the political domain whatsoever in the factual life of individuals.

Above I wrote that, according to Taylor, James plays off the individual aspect of religion too strong against, and at the detriment of the collective aspect. Given this interpretation and to try and get grip on the relation of individual and collective he confronts James's position with the view of Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) especially formulated in his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Durkheim 1915). In his analysis of the relation of the individual and the collective (the relation between inner experience and social embeddedness, so the connections between religion, state and society), Taylor is making use of the following theoretical notions: paleo-Durkheimian, neo-Durkheimian and post-Durkheimian. The three describe Weberian ideal-types, not providing a total description, but showing that our history has developed along these lines whereby the characteristics of the post-Durkheimian type have become more and more prominent in our time (Taylor 2002, 97)

In a *paleo-Durkheimian conception* of the relation of religion, state and society the connection of the individual to the sacred - the enchanted world as Taylor characterizes it - entailed that persons should belong to a church and this belonging was in principle coextensive with society. Under the paleo-Durkheimian rules often coercion was practised. It was demanded that people were forcibly integrated and even against their will were rightly connected with God. Under penalty of becoming heretical or at least inferior, people obeyed and abandoned their own religious instincts.

"The 'paleo' phase corresponds to a situation in which a sense of the ontic dependence of the state on God and higher time is still alive, even though it may be weakened by disenchantment and an instrumental spirit" (Taylor 2002, 76).

In a *neo-Durkheimian conception* of the relation of religion, state en society there is, according to Taylor, an important step toward the individual and the right of choice. So, compared with the paleo-Durkheimian conception there is no place for coercion here. People make their free choice for that particular denomination which fits best with personal wishes en demands [1]. Such a denomination is part of the total of denominations coming together under the umbrella that is named 'church'. So, the choice for the denomination of people's choice connects them also to a broader more elusive 'church', and with their choice they positioned themselves within the overall framework of that church or the nation. Freedom of choice, but in restraint, so to speak. The state as political entity is playing a providential role, because God is present and society is organized around His design.

In a *post-Durkheimian conception* of the relation of religion, state en society the emphasis is on the individual. Here we find the expressive individualism that has strong parallels with the Jamesian world of personal religion. The right of choice of the neo-Durkheimian conception is even taken a stage further here. First and foremost should the religious life and practices speak to the person and must make sense in terms of their spiritual development as they understood it, instead of being just the individual's free choice but still within a fixed cadre of for example the Apostles' Creed or the faith of the broader 'church'. "In the new expressivist dispensation, there is no necessary embedding of our link tot the sacred in any particular broader framework, whether 'church' or state" (Taylor 2002, 95). The two sins that should not be tolerated are intolerance (because people have the right to live their own life as you do), and to set aside the personal spiritual path in order to conform to external authorities such as a church, a 'church' or society. In contrast with the paleo-Durkheimian and the neo-Durkheimian conception, here the person's spirituality is no longer intrinsically related to society.

A MISSINK LINK: THE ROLE OF TRADITION

In *Varieties of Religion Today* Taylor offers us two perspectives on religion. With the first psychologist of religion, William James, he gives us a psychological perspective on religion. And with the first sociologist of religion, Emile Durkheim, he offers us a sociological view on religion.

Inspired by Dewey, I take his argument to be that in every time and with respect to every societal constellation always the coordination between the two perspectives should be taken into account. Or to put it even more Deweyan: the problem of religion is the coordination of the psychological and the social factors. In combining the two perspectives Taylor is able to prevent the one-sidedness of both a psychological (James) and a sociological (Durkheim) perspective. Religion is neither first of all a social nor an individual phenomenon. Inner or personal experience and social embeddedness are two sides of the same coin that is coined 'religion'.

Fully in line with this approach are two conclusions at the end of his book which are for me as philosopher of religious education extremely important. The first one runs as follows: "The new framework has a strongly individualist component, but this will not necessarily mean that the content will be individuating" (Taylor 2002, 112).[2] The second one is: "James seems to underrate . . . the way in which our response to our original intuitions may continue into formal spiritual practices. . . . Many people are not satisfied with a momentary sense of wow! They want to take it further, and they're looking for ways of doing so" (Taylor 2002, 116).

The content of his book and the analysis given by Taylor has challenged me to re-think my own stance in respect with the theory and praxis of religious education. Here I go. Developing in close cooperation with others my philosophy of religious education during the last decennium, I have elaborated on a few strongly related issues. Regarding the topic of personal identity formation I have outlined the aim of religious education in transformative terms emphasizing the actorship and the authorship of children and youngsters in schools. Personal identity is interpreted in a narrative way as a permanent process of reflexive construction where consistency over time is not seen as an ideal, given the plurality of postmodern culture (see Wardekker & Miedema, 2001a; 2001b).

Inspired by both Dewey and Derrida I have articulated a transactionalist and deconstructive ontology and coherent epistemology (see Miedema & Biesta, 2003 and 2004). Elaborating further on this line I have made a plea for a new, non-relativistic and non-foundationalist normativity in the philosophy of religious education (Miedema 2004b). Besides, with respect to religion and religious education I have dealt with its locus and function and have systematically given attention to the interrelatedness of the public, the social and individual domain as relatively autonomous domains within the framework of a differentiated practical-theological three-course model (Miedema 2004a).

But understanding Taylor's stance in Deweyan terms as interpreting the problem of religion as the coordination of the psychological and the social factors, I realize myself, that, beside the formal relationships between the personal and the social, the subject-matter at stake in religious education again and again need to get full attention. The attention paid to subject-matter in relation to tradition is the missing link in my theory of religious education. To put it differently: what has been the impact of the changes in relation between religion, state, society and individuals on the subject-matter, the stuff of religious education?

Dewey was clear about this: child and curriculum are forming two aspects of the one undivided learning process. That's why tradition is not the subject-matter, the stuff the child should adopt unchanged, but is stuff for development by means of which the child is able to grow. At the same time the meaningful content of a tradition is renewed in and by this very process (Dewey 1916; 1938). So, the core question for me is now: "What about tradition?"

In a recent publication the German philosopher of education, Dietrich Benner, had given (unfortunately only accessible in German and Dutch!) a very elegant and really insightful analysis in respect with the relation of pedagogy and tradition. After reading it, I realized that the dichotomy Wardekker and I have been using between transmission and transformation (Wardekker & Miedema, 2001a) has made us theoretically a bit blind for a more accurate and sophisticated view on the role and function of tradition including its conceptualization in terms of transmission and renewal.

Benner is among others also inspired by John

Dewey and is using Dewey's phrase that traditions are dependent on cultural transmission and appropriation via learning (Dewey 1916). He introduces three conceptions of the concept 'transmission', and characterizes them with the following terms: a) preserving transmission; b) changing transmission; and c) innovative transmission.

In the case of *preserving transmission* the (parts of that) tradition (are) is more or less finalized. The tradition is fixed and stable and only the holders change. As an example of this conception of transmission, Benner points to the learning process of a mother-tongue. Typical for this kind of transmission is that no explicit, artificial transmission is needed. We find this in traditional societies; tradition is equivalent here with use. Customs and habits are transmitted without explicit reflection or specifically organized practices. All goes in a natural way, within the circles of existing practices. This is not to say that all relations between children and youngsters and adults are reciprocal and asymmetrical. From the perspective of the adults the process of appropriation by children and youngsters is seen as a process of transmission, but for them it is getting in contact with an unknown and strange world. A world which can always be different from what they had expected, the so-called negativity of experiences.

With the conception of *changing transmission* both the preservation and the change of the tradition is meant. This form of transmission is first determining the relationships between adults and in a derivative sense also the relationships between adults and the younger generation. With an eye on these second relationships the transmission is explicitly organized for instance in schools, and here the younger generations are prepared for their entrance in a changing tradition. We find those transmission patterns especially in modern societies characterized by different human practices such as ethics, law, and religion. Practices each with its own logic and dynamic and with its particular institutions and no longer held together by an overarching religion or morality. Here the growing up generation is taking over from their predecessors, but there is also within the particular generations and in changing situations the appropriation of traditions.

The two conceptions of transmission, preserving

and changing transmission, are incompatible and incommensurable with each other. Instead of the positive upbringing in preserving transmission, changing transmission implies a negative pedagogy. Here the negativity of experience is not incidental but is pedagogically organized and arranged. Crucial in this conception of transmission is the fact that change and renewal are aspects of the life of the growing generations but of adults too. There is no perfect *telos* that should be reached by them, and this also holds for religion, religious identity formation and religious education. Important here are processes of exchange, encounter and dialogue within and in-between generations. Learning and changing are categories that are applicable to individual persons of different generations as well as to societies and states.

With the third conception of transmission, *innovative transmission*, Benner makes us aware of the fact that in a lot of cases, and religion is one of those, a particular traditional subject-matter or stuff can only be found in special and isolated professional practices. This stuff is no longer part of the experience of the lifeworld and everyday life within and between the generations. With this conception of innovative transmission we should realize that there are real ruptures in and between traditions. We should also realize that the loss of the potential richness of the tradition has been so normal and habitual that it is no longer even recognized as a loss due to a *tradition of amnesia* (my term) combined with the absence of forms of life, action and reflection. One of the tasks for what Benner characterizes as an inductive-innovative transmission, is making forgotten parts of the tradition accessible. Not only for the younger generations, but also for the older generations and - last but not least - for the intergenerational dialogues and encounters.

EPILOGUE

If religious forms of life, actions and reflections are no longer part of a culture, of the private, the social and the public domain it is very difficult in pedagogy to fully compensate for this lack in schools. Indeed, "school cannot compensate for society" (Basil Bernstein), and this also holds for religious personal identity formation. Nevertheless,

what can be done and should be done in pedagogy and in schools is to present and represent the richness of the religious tradition in order to rebuild (reconstruct) and further develop religious life forms characterized by fullness of experience, actions and practices. To strengthen these inductive-innovations, alliances should be built with partners in the public domain. It is my political-pedagogical as well as my pedagogical-political view that philosophers of religious education as public intellectuals should also take their responsibility here in public forums and making use of the mass media.

Charles Taylor's *Varieties of Religion Today* as warp has made me aware of a certain amnesia in my own theorizing in respect with religious education. Dietrich Benner's thoughtful analysis of the three varieties of transmission as weft has given me the chance to strengthen my philosophy of religious education with an eye on the theory and praxis of religious education. How fruitful can internal dialogues be!

Siebrren Miedema is Hendrik Pierson Professor of Christian Education and Professor of Philosophy of Religious Education in and Dean of the Faculty of Psychology and Education, and Professor of Religious Education in the Faculty of Theology, Free University Amsterdam, the Netherlands. E-mail address: s.miedema@psy.vu.nl

NOTE

1. According to Taylor: "Denominations are like affinity groups. They don't see their differences from (at least some) others as make-or-break, salvation-or-damnation issues. Their way is better for them, may even be seen as better tout court, but doesn't cut them off from other recognized denominations. They thus exist in a space of other 'churches', such that in another, more general sense, the whole group of these make up 'the church'" (Taylor 2002, 73).
2. Taylor expects that many people will find themselves joining extremely powerful religious communities, because that's where many people's

sense of the spiritual will lead them. Reading *Predicting Religion* (Davie et al 2003) this might indeed become the case. Others, however, predict a further grow of the secularization or a real transformation in the religious domain in terms of a shift from theism to pantheism, from outer to inner authority, from God to self-as-god, or a shift from religion to spirituality.

REFERENCES

- Benner, D. 2004. Opvoeding en traditie: behoud, verandering, vernieuwing [Education and tradition: preservation, change, renewal]. In: H. van Combrugge & W. Meijer (Eds.). *Pedagogiek en traditie, opvoeding en religie* [Pedagogy and tradition. Upbringing and religion] (pp. 173-189). Tiel: Lanno Campus.
- Casanova, J. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: university of Chicago Press.
- Davie, G., Heelas, P. & Woodhead, L. (Eds.). 2003. *Predicting Religion. Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures*. Hampshire/Burlington: Ashgate.
- Dewey, J. 1916. *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan Company
- 1938. *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan Company.
- 1972. *The Early Works. 1882-1898. Volume 5*. Carbondale/Edwardsville/London/Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Durkheim, E. 1915. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. George Allen & Unwin LTD: London.
- James, W. 1902 [1982]. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- 1907 [1975]. *Pragmatism*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press.
- Miedema, S. 1995. The Beyond in the Midst: the Relevance of Dewey's Philosophy of Religion for Education. In: J. Garrison (Ed.). *The New Scholarship on Dewey* (pp. 61-73). Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- 2000. The Need for Multi-Religious Schools. *Religious Education* 95 (3): 285-298.
- 2002. James's Metaphysics of Experience and Religious Education. In: J. Garrison, R.L.

- Podeschi & E. Bredo (Eds.). *William James and Education* (pp. 74-88). New York: Teachers College Press.
- 2003. *De onmogelijke mogelijkheid van levensbeschouwelijke opvoeding* [The impossible possibility of religious education]. Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij.
- 2004a. A Public, Social, and Individual Perspective on Religious Education. Religious Voices from the Past and the Present. In: G. Jover & P. Villamor (Eds.). *Voices of Philosophy of Education. Proceedings of INPE 2004* (pp. 193-202). Universidad Complutense: Madrid.
- 2004b. *Beyond Foundationalism. A Plea for a New Normativity in the Philosophy of Religious Education*. Invited presentation in the RE Research in Europe Seminar, Faculty of Theology - Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, University of Lund, Sweden, March 11-14.
- Miedema, S. and G.J.J. Biesta. 2003. Instruction or Educating for Life? On the Aims of Religiously-affiliated Schools and Others. *International Journal of Education and Religion* 4 (1): 81-96.
- 2004. Jacques Derrida's Religion With/Out Religion and the Im/Possibility of Religious Education. *Religious Education*, vol. 99, no 1, pp. 23-37.
- Rorty, R. 1997. Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance. In: R.A. Putnam (Ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (pp. 84-102). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Ch. 1989. *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press.
- 1991. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Concord: Anansi Press.
- 2002. *Varieties of Religion Today. William James Revisited*. Cambridge, M.A./London, U.K.: Harvard University Press.
- Wardekker, W.L. & S. Miedema (2001a). Denominational School Identity and the Formation of Personal Identity. *Religious Education*, vol. 96, no 1, pp. 36-48.
- 2001b. Identity, Cultural Change, and Religious Education. *British journal of Religious Education*, vol. 23, no 2, pp. 76-87.

