

**Narthical Religious Learning  
Redefining the Theology of Religious Education  
in Terms of Pilgrimage**

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Those who travel, move through time and space. This can also be said for those who learn: you undertake a mental learning route and you are on your way to new insights. Moreover, a good learning process is adventurous, just like a good journey. On the road you can get the taste of exploring new horizons and of enriching your personal identity. But does the journey surprise you in ways not foreseen? Does it change your attitude towards life, your knowledge, your achievements? Does it cast a new light on who you are? Does it bring new meaning to your questions and desires? In this article I will investigate some core concepts of religious education with respect to their 'travel proficiency'. I want to find out whether and how modern religious education can be something of an adventurous journey and whether it contributes to a life of dedication, trusting in the road and life itself. How does a (young) person come home to his own biography while he is still on the road? Good religious education deals with these questions. In my handling of these issues I plead for a mystagogical-communicative or 'narthical' approach to religious education.

### **1. The art of travelling**

You can travel like a tourist: consuming, greedy and always demanding. You can also travel like a pilgrim: contemplative, open to surprises and taking time to digest the experience quietly. In our post-modern culture, travelling is often thought of and perceived as a tourist event: you book a trip (and not a journey), do some sightseeing, and arrange an insurance, etc. And maybe it cannot be otherwise, considering the hastiness of our time. The latter at least represents the opinion of Zygmunt Bauman (1996). Travelling is affected by our consumer culture: while travelling people often fall victim to a competitive spirit and supermarket behavior. To illustrate this with an example: recently I learned that *sjerpa*'s (hired native carriers) collected four tons of garbage on the sides of the Mount Everest.

The true challenge of travelling, however, is to be open and receptive to what you encounter on the way and what rearranges your course of life. Who truly travels, discerns differences, for what matters and for what up to that time was missing in one's own frame of reference. He is open to people and circumstances that are different. Travelling like a pilgrim supposes the willingness and the skills to change one's perspective on the road. Who really travels, is at home on the road, like pilgrims they feel like a fish in the water when they have to stand the elements of

nature and culture and rearrange them in view of their own path of life. The predicaments of their journey, being so close to the elements, helps them to be continuously be aware of this transformation process. Who never has had any blisters on their feet from walking, or strained calves from cycling, who, in other words, has not experienced the elements, has never really travelled at all. There are people who are in 'search of themselves' while travelling, solely focused on their own individual well-being. They are 'self-saturated'. For them travelling is a matter of self-recognition in a foreign and unknown world. There are also people who are empty and 'miss out on themselves' while on the road. They fail to notice anything, except what they immediately recognise (such as a McDonald's restaurant). Travelling like a pilgrim, though, is something different than being solely in search of or missing out on oneself. It is a form of art: it supposes standing still, and having a lasting attention for the small stories of others, stories that exactly belie the big story of our selves (interior) and of commerce (exterior). This repose or standing still is perfectly compatible with being on the road. It is necessary to be ushered by experiences, to leave the comfort of the old and familiar. Experience (comes from the Latin *experire* which means: to go outside) is breaking out of yourself and being moved by other matters that inspire you, mentally as well as physically.

## **2. Learning by travelling**

Is this travelling also possible in a purely mental form? Is it conceivable to travel between four walls, such as in a classroom? Can an intentional learning process evoke the same experiences as those of a pilgrim? These are difficult questions. Some will say that the learning experience of the pilgrimage cannot be attained at school anymore. Children would no longer be sensitive to casual observations, they would rather be more inclined to react to immediate and radical sensations they experience. Schools should therefore be suppliers of "travel kicks", who use every means to let children repeatedly experience new matters. This is an educational perspective with little future. In this way children learn about the latest material equipment, have exciting adventures and visit exotic destinations, but they do not learn what it means to enrich themselves and to be absorbed on the road. Learning in this way is artificial; it is too smooth and too soft, it lacks the challenging predicament of a continual search and discovery, such as shown by a pilgrim.

An exaggerated ICT interest in education therefore has some negative aspects. A world of difference activated with a mouse click, can become too ordinary and stimulate indifference. The impression is given that relevant knowledge is available every where, that it costs no effort, and what is worse: that it does not cost you any effort to get it from the other (the *provider*). Good ICT education does not exclude a concrete meeting with others, but rather includes it. Teachers will therefore always remain necessary in modern education: they help students to interpret collected knowledge. They can ask for the context of the given information and stimulate them to bear responsibility for what they learn. That responsibility is fundamental and

concrete: it deals with answering questions which, hidden or direct, are directed at you, also when you surf the Internet. Knowledge implies moral conscience. Those who learn, at the same time need to practice themselves in questioning the moral load of that very particular learning process. Practicing the moral value of communication that enters the classroom through the portal of the Internet (porn, violence, extremism, devaluation of humanity and the environment, etc.) in my opinion is far more important than the acquirement of expensive ICT techniques (Roebben 1994 and 1999).

A little stubbornness however, can do no harm in education. The pilgrim's perspective on learning (that is the composure to stand still and perceive, interpret and realise the potential of a given situation) will in the long run be preferable to the voracity of the tourist perspective. The reasons are twofold. First, you do not have to take everything for granted while being on the road. Some things are just unacceptable, because they are inhumane and therefore demand or presuppose a critical reflection of the learner. A second reason consists of the idea that modern notions such as adaptive learning and constructive learning will only be developed when valuable destinations are presented within the context of learning as a travel experience. Young people long for life perspectives that are consistent and meaningful and which truly deal with something. They want to travel, but they also want to reach a home. Restlessness is of all ages: each generation wants to rearrange reality in accord of its own visions. The question of young persons today however is whether or not they should take the effort to bother at all. The essentialism of master narratives is over. It is not present anymore in the mind set of young people. They did not experience these narratives and they did not witness the accompanying emancipating process. Their key question today is: how to cope with plurality and profusion without becoming violent or depressed. Is there a horizon of meaningfulness that fills our search with sense and sensitivity? Are there images of successful lives that can inspire us? Or do we have to find out everything ourselves? Travelling and being on the road seem to be the current keywords for a vital and resilient attitude towards life, but do young persons truly possess sufficient guarantees to be 'at home on the road'?

New educational daring is necessary in education. Beyond the concepts of construction and deconstruction, today's demand is reconstruction. Many intuitively feel what Charles Taylor (1992) called the 'malaise of modernity'. Many also acknowledge that the pre-modern answers are no longer valid and that it is useless to return to the past. However, there are few viable alternatives. Apparently society has serious remarks to post-modern education. Does she in fact want anything to do with it? Does society have a ready ear for the questions of young persons? Maybe that is the first and most essential step: to listen to the protests and yearning of young persons who defy the stressed strive for individuality of our time. Could it be that young people just about have had it with rummaging around and that they on top to that are ready to really delve into what matters and engages? Could it be that they are asking for the final destination of individualisation? Could

this envelop the demand for a new culture, in the sense of cultivation or 'refinement' of individualisation? And would that not be the deeper meaning of post-modern desire of humankind – as thought in the analogy of the term 'ennobled autonomy', autonomy considering the well-being of the other, thus Emmanuel Levinas?

### 3. The discovery of meaning in religious education

Religious education encompasses *meaning giving*. This is a modern and active term: it supposes a high degree of thoughtfulness and stems from the idea of creating your own life journey and destination. It sometimes happens that from this perspective the subject unintentionally receives the status of a tourist event: the teacher goes on a journey with his students and shows them the different ways in which people give meaning to their lives. At home again, he invites the student to make a choice. The danger of this approach lurks around the corner: young people do not feel involved and will in the long run show a tendency to escape – looking for distraction and non-commitment.

*Receiving meaning* seems a good term to me to describe the pre-modern process: the meaning of life was offered to people; it was described and defined by the church and state. In the past, 'travelling' was not an option during religious education. There you learned that the world outside was in agreement with the world inside. You learned that a world of differences did not exist, unless someone deviated from the right doctrine - an expression of behaviour that was not permitted in those times and that resulted in radical exclusion.

What can be considered as the post-modern alternative, in correspondence with the desire of young people today? I propose the term *discovery of meaning*. During religious education classes, young persons learn the skill of rereading reality from a philosophical and religious perspective. That perspective is given to them through the life stories of others who themselves dealt creatively with reality. They discover the concept of their lives by making a detour through these stories. Nobody has been given the ability to directly observe the meaning of life and this cannot be mediated either (the pre-modern perspective). A merely descriptive analysis of possible perspectives of meaning (the modern perspective) is seen as insufficient. A literary 'detour' (a term of Paul Ricoeur, quoted by Streib 1998) on the other hand is a thought experiment: it challenges young persons to reconsider their own stories from a non-factual presence, from the possibility of 'it could as well be otherwise'. That confrontation is always surprising ('I have never seen it that way before'), but never alienating. In this model the foreknowledge of young people is not cancelled out, but reconstructed from the perspective of the other or the stranger. They then come to the conclusion that what they already knew was not so silly, but reasonable and meaningful. They can view their knowledge in relation to the experiences of people who have struggled with the complexity of life and collected fragments of answers. Living is like travelling: a reconstruction. Learning can cherish the same pretension.

This type of 'discovering' learning does not provide ultimate answers but opens the hermeneutical space in which seeking can be transformed into a meaningful and fulfilling practice. By means of stories of good and deepened life young adults learn to discover that these stories could make a difference in their lives as well. The fundamental question is not whether we should translate and customize religious traditions into a perfectly fitting lifestyle for the young or that we should leave traditions as they are. The question is whether we are able to apply the communication of religious tradition in such a way that it inspires and *moves* young adults to deepen their lives and to discover the very meaning of it.

#### **4. A hermeneutical-communicative approach**

'Most trains ride along the back of life' thus sings the Dutch performer Herman van Veen. Perhaps this is a striking image of religious education. Students are taken along on a journey, gathered in a train (communicative) where they can learn from each other and from the stories from outside, how to understand and to cope with reality in view of the reconstruction of a sense of meaning for their own lives (hermeneutic). This seems to be the core of the hermeneutical-communicative approach of religious education which as such is a theoretical concept predominantly present in the new curriculum of Roman-Catholic religious education in Flanders (Roebben 2001; Lombaerts & Pollefeyt 2004) and which also can be discerned in the recent religious educational and didactical developments within the protestant-Christian side of the Netherlands (Kuindersma & Miedema 2004). This approach assumes the didactical possibility to invite young adults in a communal quest in which a profusion of alternative life views and clear-cut communication contribute to an elucidation (if not enlightenment) of ones own position and opinion. This course wants to give young adults the opportunity to formulate and justify their religious origins and future. The objective does not consist of the intention to initiate them into one particular world view, but to make them sensible for the diversity that surrounds them and to hand them skills to deal with this abundance. The point of departure is the given that there exists a correlative effect on a pedagogical level between the themes of life that tend to puzzle young adults and the (many and possible) answers that have been generated through religious traditions in time, and which today are presented by the teacher, the curriculum, the handbook, etc. The term 'hermeneutical communication' which is used as a guide for educational concepts within the Dutch protestant-Christian world, confirms this didactical option. Meaningful words and gestures that could contribute to their own meaning giving proces are *revealed* to young adults. Or put differently, young adults *discover* new meaning in old stories and traditions and learn precisely through this religious appropriation how to define themselves.

Stories form the access road to this learning experience: small stories which show the back of life and which have not yet been flattened out by the big and overruling scripts of market and media. Children and young adults will not be left to

their fate. They will be taken on a detour and safely brought to meaningful contexts and perspectives, where meaningful words are spoken and actions are undertaken. The teacher is willing to uphold their learning environment with new impulses, unsuspected views and sometimes even raw and uncensored reality. Thus, there will be discussions about what is and what could or should be. This concrete utopia is what stimulates and compels the religious educator to be at home on the road. In this 'pilgrimage' he leads his students.

## 5. A mystagogical-communicative approach

This stimulation of the correlation between what actually is and what proactively could be is of a pedagogical nature. Young people are enabled to think 'religiously', because it means something to them, they can retrieve the religious perspective, the religious sphere is not unknown nor unfamiliar to them. They certainly know that people can be confronted with the ultimate questions of life. This correlation however initially is not of a *theological* nature, as was intended by Paul Tillich. On the basis of a religious socialisation at home, the teacher used to disclose theological contents by referring to the related practice of everyday life. Divine intervention was effectuated by this concept on the basis of the needs of the searching individual and his daily experience. This particular religious background is no longer given anymore. Children enter the classroom without language, tradition and community (hence without the possibility of theological correlation) but their questions of life remain, often unspoken and sky high. I am strongly convinced that something happens to these children when they are brought into the hermeneutical-communicative process of religious self-enlightenment and are invited to 'co-express' themselves with the sense-exploring stories of the other side. The *pedagogical correlation* (which they request for: listen closely to our needs so that you can guide us on our journey and can support us with your insight) can erupt into a new theological correlation (where do I find new life for my soul?) Those who introduce young adults to an environment impregnated with strong and meaningful didactical impulses, those who escort them into the 'narthical space' between human ambivalence and the longing for wholeness that evolves out of this ambivalence, cannot but admit that questions will emerge like water from a fountain. Those who during the theme of 'loyalty towards your parents' for example come up with the story of Isaac's relation with Abraham are assured of a hefty discussion. And this will be likewise in case of Job's story considering 'suffering' and Moses story regarding the question of 'vocation'.

These questions are near and related to the turbidity within the learner himself who abides between longing and perspective. These questions are powerful because they refer to the ultimate questions to which religious people of old have tried to find meaningful answers by ways of contents (dogmatics) and lifestyle (ethics). Those teachers who during these important learning moments restrict themselves to offering information and encouraging communication cause, in my opinion, serious

damage to the religious learning process of modern young adults. Indeed, one offers an overview of the digestive system, but one tends to forget (or is afraid to admit or cannot bear the thought) that young adults crave for *soul food*. One does not have to be afraid to catechise or encourage the young to testify their faith. Catechesis after all presupposes pre-catechesis which on its turn presumes religious socialisation. And this is no longer available. Are we courageous enough to offer them the food they want? Do we have anything to offer at all? Or are we left empty handed? Admitting the latter is difficult within the context of religious education which is impregnated and characterised by the rationale of the modern school and its powerful (read: information flooded) learning environments. Do we dare and create space in the profession of religious education which is filled with emptiness, filled with care for the essential, trusting therein that new spiritual experiences originate when young adults (not only literally but also) experientially learn to redefine and re-source themselves through religious traditions? And is the role of imagination put to the forefront in that process, so that the cognitive operation of sense-giving (which is indispensable for didactical preliminary work) can permeate the soul of the learner? The soul, in my opinion, is a theological conceptualisation of the notion 'narrative identity'.

I plead for a ready to depart religious education in which young adults are more than just ferreting outsiders who – how well intended it may be – learn to functionally deliberate every possibility in consideration of their identity formation. Religious traditions do not solely function as 'identity providers'. Rather, they are sources of wisdom that quench the soul. Of course this supposes a critical 'reading' of those sources and a condemnation of a fundamentalist use of sources, an application that defiles the soul and fills her with hatred. A virtuous religious education justifies the genuine language game of religion. And this language game is referring to what is unsystematic, ironic, subversive, in-definite - and in that sense open for the indefinite, the undefined, the a-functional (Roebben 2004). I plead for a religious education that is explorative and informative, which learns to discern congealed traditions in key stories (*pedagogical*: hermeneutical-communicative), and which also and foremost learns to de-congeal or liquefy, so that one can arrive at the original key experience or underlying key question that enraptures the soul (*theological*: mystagogical-communicative). The soul after all is naturally susceptible to the mystery of reality as it unfolds itself in the life of the human person. In a learning process the soul can be encouraged to reveal itself to the learning person. In this perspective the teacher acts as a midwife who time and again helps the learner to give birth to new insights.

## **6. Narthical religious learning**

In the pedagogical space of desire and perspective, in the clearance of the searching of the learner and the proposal of the teacher to undertake a mental 'detour', can therefore originate a dynamic which exceeds the learning process. It can begin to

dawn the learner that his questions are too big for the answers that are available and that he needs to carry on with his quest. It can also happen that his question dissolves into nothing in comparison with the grandeur of the presented answers. The learner moreover can come to understand that none of his foreknowledge is appropriate to continue his course of life and that he needs to turn back radically. Finally, the insight can come to the surface that learning is a perpetual process because transformation and change are ubiquitous and nothing appears to be the same.

Great things can happen in the narthical learning space. The narthex, in a metaphoric sense, therefore is not only a pedagogical but also a theological place of confrontation. In the learning process a space can originate for what cannot be learned but only can be 'received'. In the narthex one can come to understand that one cannot ground ones own existence, that one is not the source of ones thoughts, that one in his search already has been found and that one never reverts to definitive senselessness when one might get lost or lose sight of track. The German theologian and philosophical educationalist Helmut Peukert calls this 'transformative learning' (in contrary to most of the learning forms which he calls 'cumulative learning') and considers this the educational method of the future: losing oneself in the encounter with the O/other, to experience oneself in a completely different way as 'being found' (Peukert 2002). According to the author particularly churches and moral communities have to fulfil a unique role in this 'new learning', since they (ideally) represent traditions of openness that learn people to faithfully deal with situations of radical transformation (like healing after breakage, forgiveness after sin, life after death, etc.).

Religious education then becomes a pilgrimage. The learning span could then be compared to the situation the pilgrim finds himself craving for water and coolness on his journey and finding something completely different for what he had expected and hoped for in the narthex of the church building. A perfect example of this learning span is the narthex of the Madeleine church in Vézelay ([www.lejourduseigneur.com/vezelay/00.htm](http://www.lejourduseigneur.com/vezelay/00.htm)). On his journey through the Burgundian hills, along the way of one of the four central axes of the French route to Compostella, the pilgrim has turned into a two legged shambling crave. Is there anybody who could quench his thirst and fan him some coolness? Something extraordinary happens when entering the narthex: his entreaty for refreshment is answered with beautiful sculptures of the Christian history of prosperity and salvation. The triumphing Christ wants to offer him 'inspired water', something completely different for what he expected and hoped for. But at the same time a sigh of recognition resounds in his soul. He lets go of his overacting search for mental prosperity and lets himself be found (in this case by Christ). The quest receives new meaning, the longing is rearranged, questions that have been asked along the way are not solved but rephrased. Life receives new meaning: a new sense (pedagogically), a new direction (theologically).

## 7. Implications for religious education

The metaphor of the narthex is vulnerable. It could be misinterpreted and to some extent it also gives a cause for it. The narthex after all (literally) is connected to a singular church building which represents a particular faith tradition. The danger therefore exists that the narthex will be considered an anthropological steppingstone for the 'real deal' in the sacred space of one particular faith tradition. The image however by no means intends to uphold the narrowness of such a stringent view. I want to use the image to explain a certain religious pedagogical method (taken from the Greek *meta hodos*, literally the road by what): the existential question will only be recognised in the feeding of the tension of desire and perspective. Religious experience will only appeal to the imagination (as a possible answer to that existential question) when this tension is conceptualised, in other words when the human desire comes across words and images that intrinsically elucidate and renew. This encounter between desire and perspective is, as has been said, doubly layered: the pedagogical handing over of new insights for the developing narrative identity of the pupil ("Who can I become?") can give rise to another more radical desire to come home to the mystery of who one really is ("Where do I belong?"). Origin and destiny converge in this learning process. In the following I want to explain seven religious pedagogical implications of this method.

As a religious educator one does not need to be worried about a 'hidden curriculum' of catechesis or confession of faith. Catechesis after all supposes pre-catechesis, based on the explicit request to become a member or participant of a faith community. Within the narthical learning model I assume the conclusion that many no longer adhere to that idea – maybe practically indicate that they are baptised and/or did their confession and received the holy communion, but in their actual religious practice they hardly come through. I assume the conclusion that a lot of children and young adults today haven't experienced a religious socialisation at home and that a pre-catechetical 'desire' therefore is out of the question. The desire that I'm talking about in this narthical learning paradigm is of a totally different nature. It resonates in the question that children ask their teacher: 'Do you truly believe yourself what you are telling us? What does having faith mean to you? How does it *work* for you?' The longing therefore resides in being unbiased, a typical situation that in a post-secular living environment increasingly is gaining ground. The question therefore is whether or not contemporary religious education has the courage to cultivate this space and to show how concrete religious people and groups engage in the clarification of that space of existential desire. The narthex for that reason must not be misunderstood, in the literal sense of the word, as a pre-catechetical portal of which the outside door is closed like a fyke once people have set foot in the 'keel' of the church, in the intimate (read: liturgical-sacramental-catechetical) part of the church. In this paradigm therefore there is no such question of more or better, such as in the misinterpreted stage model of Kohlberg and Fowler.

This model transgresses the 'classic' subdivision of sacred church versus secular world as prescribed in 'modern' secularisation theories. The profane after all can manifest itself in the inner space of the church, the sacred can be disclosed outside of the church. In the thoroughfare of the narthex both worlds meet thereby mutually affecting each other. That this approach requires new demands of Christian theology needs no say. The need for a new creation theology and a resurrection related understanding of revelation in which the Redeemer shows his true self to everyday people and who indulges and even exceeds in the commonness of daily life is of pressing importance. An exciting task awaits future theological reflection to continuously ask whether and how the sacramental experience of wholeness, characteristic for a good liturgy, rises in the normality of our daily existence. Or in other words, how the narthical method works the other way around and impresses upon transference of desire and perspective, only now directed straight into the world! And something else: the term 'lay spirituality' in this regard is completely outdated. Both the faithful and their ministers need to take their chances to a life of dedication amidst the complexity of everyday life.

Within the narthex it is necessary to awaken and nurture the already present 'transcendental openness' of the tension between immanence and transcendence, so that the learner thinks of himself as an open question and hopes to find fertile and steady ground to answer this existential question. This implies that narthical teachers must carefully listen to what the desires of (young) contemporaries are and that they must be able to voice the often unarticulated issues in their lives. Moreover, they need to encourage them in their effort to phrase their own experiences. For that reason they must constantly enter the agora of life to conscientiously observe the desire of contemporaries for life fulfilment and to (help them) conceptualise this.

Another aspect in the bipolarity of narthical leadership is, besides the observation of desire, the cultivation of perspective – or in other words, the maintenance of the 'religious backpack'. What should it contain? What kind of provision does the teacher take with him for along the way? The answer to this question requires a lot hermeneutical sensibility: which biblical key stories are able to illuminate and illustrate the existential questions of today's contemporaries? What is of eminent importance? Which 'hierarchy of truths' prevails? Which central spiritual directives deserve to be conceptualised or 'essentialized'? And what can I leave behind as lumber? What does only amount to more confusion and leads us away from returning home to our own biographical narratives? I strongly believe that this line of thought implies a renewed engagement of academic theology towards the religious-educational discourses of today. There is a desperate need for biblical, ritual-liturgical, political-ethical and cultural-religious focal points to help understand and stimulate the quest of our young contemporary fellow sense-seekers.

The narthical space is also a place of meeting where one has the freedom to theologise. Many kinds of questions and experiences after all can come up within the continuum of immanence-transcendence. Some will talk about the radical 'opposite' in their lives, while others will tell about a life in human solidarity. New traditional

patterns, interpretations and even contents will originate in this creative encounter. It is obvious that (religious) traditions within the narthical space will be reanimated and reactivated, if young people are given the chance to acquire them, however impudent this may seem to the 'traditionalist' that hides in every teacher!

'Learning by doing' is an important principle within the narthex. I am under the impression that the rigid didactical approach of religious education has put the cognitive competencies (too much) to the forefront. Modern religious education needs to stimulate 'thoughtfulness' and aims to teach children how to effectively phrase and view their own religious identity. But religious literacy in my opinion surpasses the reason of this rational approach. It is also a matter of taste and inner (and internal) familiarity. In the fear to indoctrinate young adults, one no longer dares to initiate young people into the religious sentiments, of actually lived faith through symbolism, rituals, church social welfare work and tangible encounters with believers and faith communities. It however is precisely the young who seems to have a more natural susceptibility and openness. In relation to this notion, the German religious pedagogy has developed an interesting direction: the 'Kirchenpädagogik' (Degen and Hansen 1998) – discovering the meaning of sacred space by visiting churches, synagogues and mosques. And also youth ministry has had the educational heart to introduce the phenomenon of monastery weekends to students thereby offering them the opportunity to experience the 'wealth and/or breadth' of religious contemplation (Zondervan 2004). Isn't it a challenge to integrate these inspiring concepts within the regular school system as part of religious education?

The narthical perspective ultimately confronts us with the inevitable question of energetic communities. Do they still exist? And if they do, are they correlative and narthical enough? What about their spiritual undertow or zest? Isn't it true that we often have to conclude that religious communities fail to address the need of today's sense-seekers, the 'believing without belonging', because they themselves are so soulless and their members so 'belonging without believing'? Is there anybody home in the inn? Is there life in the inn? Is anything 'cooking' in there? Or have the last already turned off the light and closed the door at the same time...?

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