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Disciplinary Note

## **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND/AS KENOSIS**

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My academic work as a Catholic practical theologian consists, among other things, in rethinking religious education from a theological perspective. What are the “theologoumena” we have at our disposal to critically reframe the “order” of contemporary religious education (RE)? What really contributes to the well-being of our pupils and students, considering RE with the lens of Christian faith? In my book *Theology Made in Dignity. On the Precarious Role of Theology in Religious Education* (Leuven/Paris, Peeters, 2016, p. 93-96), one can find the following argumentation.

My proposition is a kenotic-theological concept of RE, modelled by and analogous to the incarnational dynamic of the revelation. In the Christian tradition Jesus Christ did not stick to his godly dignity, but he became human. In doing so, he shared the vulnerable existence of human beings. [ 1 ] Through this act of solidarity he shows who God is and points to humanity as the eminent way to salvation. In involving himself in the lives of ordinary (or ‘lay’) people, Jesus expresses his solidarity with them and his promise of ultimate healing and eschatological sanctification. Jesus is the exegete of God. In the gospels we learn from him what it means to be fully human [ 2 ] and where this potentially brings us. [ 3 ]

The kenotic dimension of the Christian revelation gives shape to a specific theology for RE. In RE we paradoxically teach ‘letting go,’ we step aside as teachers and create space for the voice of future generations and their interpretation of the good life. According to the American practical theologian Tom Beaudoin, [ 4 ] as Christians we witness permanently this act of kenosis or “dispossession,” in “learning to participate in handing over. Or better, learning how to rehearse through the hands what has already been given over”. [ 5 ] In this respect, the RE teacher should not ‘transmit’ or ‘bring’ the tradition, but should rather ‘bear’ the tradition. He/she does not have to inspire people, but has to gather those who are already inspired. This “practice of dispossession” [ 6 ] within RE is, according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a “descent into secret discipline”, [ 7 ] that is even hidden for the teacher in RE. What the child or the young person finally appropriates from the learning process, what he/she takes away as soul food from the table, cannot be planned in RE. Learning as taking away is an act of freedom. The RE teacher can only provide and prepare the table of the “secret discipline”.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church in # 170 acknowledges the kenotic dimension of religious tradition and religious learning. When discussing the language of faith, it argues:

*Non in formulas credimus, sed in res quas illae exprimunt et quas nobis fides 'tangere' permittit. "Actus autem [fidei] credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem [enuntiatam]". Tamen ad has res adiutorio formulationum fidei appropinquamus. Hae permittunt fidem exprimere et transmittere, illam in communitate celebrare, illam facere propriam et ex illa magis magisque vivere".*

The translation says:

We do not have to believe in formulas, but in the soulful realities that are expressed in these formulas and that are allowed to be touched by us. The act of faith does not accumulate in what can be said, but in what can be experienced. We only use the language of faith to have access to these soulful experiences. Language is the only vehicle at our disposal to understand our faith. But nobody can stop us from accessing God in our own voice and nobody can force us to believe in God in the framework of one specific (theological) voice or language. We are allowed to access the realities of faith as children: in a deep state of vulnerability and receptivity, in our own experience of "relational consciousness", without being forced and in our own right. [ 8 ]

This is precisely what Karl Rahner meant when he argued that we need a "theology of childhood", of vulnerability and radical openness, when it comes finally to the act of faith, [ 9 ] to the double act of "decentration and de-dication". [ 10 ] This disposition of receptive learning, of learning with 'open hands' is at the center of a theology of *Bildung*. In this respect RE will always need to be open for encounter (communication), for personal storytelling (narration) and for the existential dimension of human life (spirituality) – briefly for the "spiritual learning community". Authentic RE is in this regard always a soteriological act or an act of healing. In the end good RE restores the communication, narration, and spiritual flourishing of the person and the community.

## End Notes

- [ 1 ] In the New Testament in Paul's Letter to the Philippians 2, 5-11.
- [ 2 ] B. Roebben, *Seeking Sense in the City. European Perspectives on Religious Education*, Münster, Lit-Verlag, 2013 (second enlarged edition), p. 242-243: "The gospel itself elucidates how this process takes place. There, you will not find any prophetic oracle or subtle apologetic arguments for the existence of God, but the narrative of a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. He is a loyal friend, companion, and guest at the table. He tells stories, but most of the time he listens. In his listening he becomes authoritative, because he radically places his fellow human beings in the middle (...) to bring the Gospel closer to itself, where it belongs, namely into the realm of friendship where God happens".
- [ 3 ] See for this idea also the apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), # 133.
- [ 4 ] See T. Beaudoin, *Witness to Dispossession: The Vocation of the Postmodern Theologian*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2008.
- [ 5 ] Ibid., p. 144.
- [ 6 ] See I. Geerinck, *God Embarrassed by the Pastor? A Search for New Practices in Religious Education*, in D. Nauer, R. Nauta & H. Witte (eds.), *Religious Leadership and Christian Identity*, Münster, Lit-Verlag, 2004, p. 143-153.
- [ 7 ] See T. Beaudoin, *Witness to Dispossession*, p. 144-147.
- [ 8 ] See D. Hay and R. Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, London, Harper Collins, 1998.
- [ 9 ] See K. Rahner, *Gedanken zu einer Theologie der Kindheit*, in Ibid., *Schriften zur Theologie* (Band 7), Einsiedeln/Zürich/Köln, Benziger Verlag, 1966, p. 313-329.
- [ 10 ] See B. Roebben, *Theology Made in Dignity*, p. 63-80.

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