

“Deus semper maior”.

Radical existentialism as a point of reference for religious educational leadership in Western Europe

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Summary:

New forms of leadership, based on the moral integrity and spiritual resilience of the teacher, are needed for the future of education in general and religious education in particular. In this contribution, the global challenges to society, education and teacher education are formulated from a radical existentialist perspective: truth, goodness and beauty need not only to be conceived, but above all to be performatively enacted and narratively compacted. Looking into the future, this bottom-up approach will have to take shape especially in inter-religious and inter-worldview learning processes in the classroom. The text reflects in a second movement on the theo-poetic significance of this development.

Résumé:

De nouvelles formes de leadership, basées sur l'intégrité morale et la résistance spirituelle de l'enseignant, sont nécessaires pour l'avenir de l'éducation en général et de l'éducation religieuse en particulier. Dans cette contribution, les défis mondiaux pour la société, l'éducation et la formation des enseignants sont formulés dans une perspective existentialiste radicale : le bien, le vrai et le beau ne doivent pas seulement être conçus, mais surtout mis en œuvre de manière performante et comprimés de manière narrative. À l'avenir, cette approche ascendante devra prendre forme en particulier dans les processus d'apprentissage interreligieux et inter-convictionnel dans la salle de classe. Le texte réfléchit dans un deuxième mouvement à la signification théopoétique de ce développement.

Keywords:

Leadership, religious education in schools, teacher education, interreligious dialogue, performative learning, radical existentialism, theo-poetics

Mots clés :

Leadership, éducation religieuse dans les écoles, formation des enseignants, dialogue interreligieux, apprentissage performatif, existentialisme radical, théopoétique

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Introduction

We live in uncertain times. People in Western Europe are asking themselves how the world should proceed in light of the many challenges that are looming – climate, health, justice, peace. These questions are particularly pregnant in the education and formation of children and young people. What orientation do we give to future generations? What compass should they have in a world that often seems to drift without direction? What moral and spiritual provisions do they need to face the challenges of today and tomorrow with resilience and courage? On closer inspection, many adults also lack the reference points for the good life. In this contribution, I defend the thesis that new forms of educational leadership will be needed in the future to deal with this situation. Future educators and teachers will be challenged with respect to their moral integrity and spiritual resilience.

The school subject of religious education (RE), present in its many guises in the European school landscape, is the place “par excellence” where this kind of leadership of teachers is required and will be required again and again. This subject should itself be an oasis of calm in the school, a place where children and young people can unwind and find solidly grounded “soul food” for the many existential questions with which they struggle in their identity development. That this subject cannot be separated from the social context goes without saying. Today, however, education is in a *state of urgency*, precisely because the complex contextual challenges constantly demand them to do so. Calm seems to have disappeared. This acceleration can lead to impulsive and unreflective solutions. Today, rather, combinations of thoughtfulness and decisiveness, of imagination and deliberation are required.

This contribution attempts to connect the different complex perspectives. It focuses successively (1) on RE in Europe as an important site of orientation and inspiration for children and young people, (2) on the challenges to teacher education today, and (3) on the future of teacher education in light of the latest book of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. This text is anchored in my work as (1) president of the “European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education”,² as (2) a teacher educator at the University of Bonn, and as (3) an academic theologian who values the public significance of his work. The considerations in this article are modeled on a “theo poetic” access to the everyday reality of education.

“Theopoetics” is a systematic-theological concept borrowed by Scottish practical theologian Heather Walton, among others, from American theologian Catherine Keller, which bridges the gap between God’s action of salvation and the human mystical/political action.³ God and the human being share on the basis of the incarnation in the same “poësis”, in the same pattern of action, which focuses on creativity, vulnerability and justice. It is in the incarnated praxis of everyday life that this action must be realized. It is there, within the daily dignity of praxis, that the Kingdom of God takes shape here and now. For Heather Walton, autoethnography and creative writing are among the theologian’s tools. Participating sensitively in practices, observing oneself in responses to reality and holding them in writing with great precision is the issue. It is a matter of “always (to) write out of those spaces and experiences that carry the sting of memory, those epiphanies, and turning point moments that leave a mark on you”.⁴ This

² www.eftre.net

³ Cf. Heather Walton, *A Theopoetics of Practice: Re-forming in Practical Theology*, in *International Journal of Practical Theology* 23 (2019) 3-23.

⁴ Norman Denzin, quoted in *ibid.*, 55.

methodological access helps me in this contribution to probe close to the practice of school RE for the permeability of God's action in the everyday, without too quick inferences or ideological distortions. Always it comes down to being aware of the fact that human beings extend their hands to God and seek to feel and understand his/her nearness. God is always greater than human designs of meaning and theologies.

1. The European RE landscape: an invitation to radical existentialism?

In the European educational landscape, most countries (except Albania and the largest part of France) have specific offerings for religious and worldview education of children and youth at school. In different organizational and curricular formats, they provide religious and/or worldview education as a school subject, sometimes in combination with education for democratic citizenship, sometimes in cooperation with churches and local faith communities, but always in compliance with the role and ethos of the school as a public space. Does this mean that God has secured a place for him-/herself on European school desks, in curricula and textbooks and in the minds of teachers and students? No, strictly speaking, God does not belong to the public space of the school. After all, he/she is "Deus semper maior". However, reflections on God as a material object in the cultural history of individual people and communities, reflections on the tensions and connections between religions in a globalized world, and on the ongoing search for transcendence in a late modern society do belong thematically in schools. Children and young people have a right to solid and trustworthy information on these issues, in order to "grow together in shared humanity"⁵ with their religious and non-religious fellows in the classroom and to discover and to deepen their personal contribution to that quest. This is the true sense of the German concept of "Bildung"⁶ – understanding my place as a unique human being within society and offering this unique value to the common good.

Numerous research projects and handbooks map the initial situation, goals, contents, learning processes and outcomes of RE at the European level. The strong research traditions on multi-faith RE (in the UK and Scandinavian countries) and denominational RE (in Western and Central Europe) challenge each other, creating synergy but often also resistance. There is a need for a more sustained exchange of insights and international knowledge transfer for a better understanding of what works effectively in RE and what does not.⁷ Contextual empirical projects, didactic concepts and models of action abound on the shop floor, but the inter-contextual exchange between these projects, concepts and models leaves much to be desired. At the European level, the difficult communication between German- and English-speaking RE research on the one hand and research in Eastern and Southern European countries on the other is especially regrettable.

⁵ Cf. Bert Roebben, *Theology Made in Dignity. On the Precarious Role of Theology in Religious Education* (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 44), Leuven/Paris/Bristol (CT), Peeters, 2016, 43-61.

⁶ Cf. Bert Roebben, *New Wine in Fresh Wineskins. Rethinking the Theologicity of Catholic Religious Education*, in M.T. Buchanan & A.-M. Gellel (Eds.), *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools* (Vol. 2), Singapore, Springer, 2019, 51-61.

⁷ Cf. Jenny Berglund, Bert Roebben, Peter Schreiner & Friedrich Schweitzer (eds.), *Educating Religious Education Teachers. Perspectives of International Knowledge Transfer* (Wissenschaft und Lehrerbildung 9), Bonn, Bonn University Press, 2023.

Elsewhere, I made an attempt to connect these research traditions into a model of “learning in the presence of the religious other”.⁸ In this I brought together the “learning about religion” and the “learning from religion” perspective of Michael Grimmitt from the UK with a more continental oriented perspective on “Bildung” of the person who in and through the encounter with the religious perspective of others “redefines and redignifies”⁹ his/her own philosophical position (“learning in/through religion”). In the interplay of information “about others,” communication “with others,” and appropriation “in/through one’s own person,” religious learning occurs. The three dimensions are important in the learning process. In view of major social challenges, new didactic concepts and models of action are being developed that link these three dimensions, such as RE for sustainable formation, RE and peace education, RE and mental health education and political RE with a specific focus on social justice.

“Is this still real RE?” highly religious students ask when confronted with these contents, pointing to the mainly moral and social interpretation of the school subject. The question is not unjustified. The socio-political implications of the subject then threaten to take over the rightful focus on the question of God – as if the double commandment of love in the New Testament is reduced to the second part, namely love for the other and love for oneself, and the first part, namely love of God, is neglected. I experience the criticism of highly religious students as a renewed challenge to education in general and to RE in particular: could it be that the circumstances in which they find themselves today call for a renewed reflection on the question of God, starting from the second part of the double commandment? That, in other words, it is appropriate not to see God as a hole-filler in education, but rather to pay attention to sustainable, healthy, socially just and peaceful relationships of people with one another – and then from there to search “theo-poetically” for how God allows him-/herself to be permeabilized in that engagement, to be known, to be revealed? In all of this, the wonder for the hidden presence of God in the midst of learning in the presence of the religious other can take on a new lustre.

I argue for *radical existentialism*, a deep connection of human beings to the sustainable, healthy, righteous and peaceful undercurrent of life, from which a new sense of transcendence can freely emerge. Elsewhere, I have called this an incarnate or kenotic perspective on education.¹⁰ I will now go a step further: along the path of “theo-poetics” – practices of creativity, vulnerability and justice, which people share with God (see above) – a new knowledge of God can emerge, of a God who exists, but above all “insists” (according to John Caputo) on people’s creative, vulnerable and just actions, including in school and RE.

2. RE teacher education in Europe: living differences in dialogue

In the context of expansion of life worlds of young people today through mobility, migration and media, there is a growing need for more orientation – for storytelling (who am I with my vulnerable and unique story?) and for community building (how can I become a fellow human being for others and they for me?).

The key pedagogical concept that connects the two, the personal and the common, is dialogue: by staying close to the lived reality found in the unique personal stories of young people and by probing communally in these stories for the underlying universal-human

⁸ Cf. Bert Roebben, *Theology Made in Dignity*, 13-18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 93-96.

experiences, a new, beneficial connection can emerge. People are vulnerable in difference: they need each other dialogically to come to maturity, to learn to make sense of the uniqueness of their own vulnerable story in light of shared human foundational experiences, here and now represented by the listening ear of others. It is important that in worldview education as many people as possible can participate in this dialogue, including those who are non-religious. This requires a common language game, a “worldview literacy”¹¹ or more specifically a “grammaire du religieux”.¹² This is a kind of grammatical “depth structure, which on the surface can lead to very different linguistic realizations,” according to the philosopher of language Noam Chomsky¹³ and which makes it possible for differences to be discussable, communicable and mutually intelligible – and, moreover, can lead to the enrichment of one’s point of view.

Traditional transmission models of RE no longer seem to work at this point. A spontaneous and tension-free correlation between religious interpretation of the teacher on the one hand and vulnerable human experiences of pupils on the other is no longer feasible in a modern classroom, because its composition, even in supposedly mono-religious groups, no longer constitutes unity. In this complex process of personal formation in the context of building the classroom as a community, correlation is no longer an issue. Rather, there is collision, worlds colliding, between curriculum and lifeworld, between teacher and students, between students themselves.¹⁴ Sometimes the teacher has to completely interrupt the learning process so that people can find each other again in the common grammar or “literacy” and move on.

Dialogue is a process: it presupposes a leap into the unknown, a surrender to the unruly strangeness of subject matter, others and oneself, an exercise in careful observation of that strangeness and a possible revision of one’s own point of view. At a deeper level, people remain unique and distinct from one another in finding ultimate answers to life’s questions. But it is precisely in that difference that they find each other as possible answers. In a good dialogue, the possibility of the other’s answer prevails, not the perfection of that answer for one’s own life question.

The interplay of differentiation in depth and dialogue in breadth, of the unique life design of the person in dialogue with the common search process of all in the classroom, requires new competencies of future RE teachers. I believe that the path of a *performative didactic* can support this, an activating, experiential didactic, which starts from aporia and differentiation, from the not-knowing, and from there takes the leap into the searching learning process.¹⁵ The meeting of people with each other in dialogue does not happen in a storm-free zone, but in the pedagogical space that is a temporary “safe and brafe space.” The metaphor of the tent is an

¹¹ Cf. Martha Shaw, *Worldview Literacy as Transformative Knowledge*, in O. Franck & P. Thalén (eds.), *Powerful Knowledge in Religious Education. Exploring Paths to a Knowledge-Based Education on Religions*, Heidelberg, Springer, 2023, 195-216.

¹² Nancy Bouchard, quoted in Geoffrey Legrand, *L’éducation religieuse par les symboles. Une chance pour le dialogue interconvictionnel et interreligieux?*, Basel, Schwabe Verlag, 2024, 205.

¹³ Quoted in Peter Kliemann, *Tübingen, Europa und Zurück. Religionsunterricht im internationalen Kontext*, Stuttgart, Calwer 2019, 53.

¹⁴ Cf. Bert Roebben, Maïke Maria Domsel, Barbara Niedermann & Sander Vloebergs, *Colliding worlds in the religious education classroom. Performative teacher education in times of transition*, in J. Berglund, B. Roebben, P. Schreiner & F. Schweitzer (eds.), *Educating Religious Education Teachers. Perspectives of International Knowledge Transfer (Wissenschaft und Lehrerbildung 9)*, Bonn, Bonn University Press, 2023, 37-55.

¹⁵ Cf. Bert Roebben & Katharina Welling, *Performative Religious Education. Chances and Challenges of a Concept in European Teacher Education*, in F. Schweitzer & P. Schreiner (eds.), *International Knowledge Transfer in Religious Education*, Münster/New York, Waxmann, 2021, 91-105.

excellent tool to describe this hermeneutic space,¹⁶ a space located between the base camp of one's own beliefs from which one departs and to which one returns after encountering other beliefs in the tent "pour scruter la nouveauté apportée par cette rencontre"¹⁷ at home again.

What are the implications for teachers and teacher education? I believe that "performative teacher education models"¹⁸ are needed, through which teachers as "wounded healers" (Carl Gustav Jung) not only perceive these aporias and differences but can also embody and stimulate them through expressive and embodied mediation. At the RE teacher education institute of the university of Bonn we have been working on models in which dance and body work, music and arts, pilgrimage and mystical theology have been developed as useful educational trajectories for deep learning-in-encounter. Another approach can be found in the symbol-didactical way of dealing with differences in the classroom, with bible didactics or children's/youth theology – honoring the personal differences between learners and the common wisdom to be found, emerging from within the dialogue.

Deep within this performative and narrative fabric, as mentioned, lies a spiritual truth: "The basic structure of being human is spiritual in nature. I become more and more myself in and to the vulnerable and nonviolent encounter with the other. And conversely, that self is indispensable to the encounter. Without difference no encounter. Without encounter no difference. This humane, ethically qualified ground structure is itself spiritual in nature. I receive deeply who I am". All this is done in complete educational freedom: no teacher can force a child or young person to take this moral and/or spiritual path.¹⁹ It must come from within.

3. New "Cosmic Connections"? Religious educational leadership for the future

As a "wounded healer," moral integrity and spiritual resilience are thus required of the teacher to handle the learning process with caution. Against the background of the great crises of our time, this is quite a task. How does one live out a meaningful life project as a teacher, how does one offer orientation as a meaning giver, without forcing students to take the path that makes sense? This is an open question that in turn calls for dialogue in teacher education programs and teachers' rooms in schools. I advocate more time for teacher consultation on values, norms and inspirations, rather than overflowing agendas with practical and organizational items.

According to Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in his latest book "Cosmic Connections," we need to go one step further.²⁰ Not only is a new universal (religious) grammar needed that connects and engages private (religious) mother tongues, a new "Dichtung" or "poësis" is needed within existing mother tongues. Reading a book like Taylor's in times of crisis seems an unnecessary waste of time. After all, it is full of poetry from the age of Romanticism and offers no ready-made recipes for the problems the world is struggling with today. The book is

¹⁶ Marianne Moyaert and Katharina Welling, quoted in B. Roebben & K. von Stosch, *Religious Education and Comparative Theology. Creating Common Ground for Intercultural Encounters*, in *Religions* 13 (11): 1014, 11.

¹⁷ Javier Melloni, quoted in Geoffrey Legrand, *L'éducation religieuse par les symboles*, 114.

¹⁸ Cf. Bert Roebben, Maike Maria Domsel, Barbara Niedermann & Sander Vloebergs., *Colliding worlds in the religious education classroom*, 45-52.

¹⁹ Cf. Ottmar John & Norbert Mette, *Freiheit – Bildung – Religion. Religionspädagogische und fundamentaltheologische Erkundungen*, Münster, LIT-Verlag, 2024.

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *Cosmic Connections. Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2024.

bulky and profound and requires time and concentration. At first glance, it seems to immerse the reader in a parallel world that is nothing like the present one.

And that is precisely the point. Taylor addresses the question of how to reconnect with what surrounds us, how to undo the “disenchantment” of the world and rediscover the in-between area or “interspace”²¹ between what appears and what really is – not from a Cartesian empirical perspective, but from a poetic-intuitive perspective. People have been given the opportunity, on the basis of a transcendental desire that has always been there,²² to rediscover and deepen this “interspace” again and to do so through language as a condensation (in German: “Dichtung”) of reality, through the muse and art. These deep experiences “have to be drawn out of us by a powerful vision of reality”,²³ and, once expressed, must also be verified in people’s conversation with each other. This requires “social engineering”,²⁴ true listening to each other and to how others give meaning to their lives as narrative identities, “to lay down the burden of hatred”²⁵ and thus be set on the road to ethical “fulfillments which our nature as human beings prescribe for us”.²⁶ Goodness arises where people work on their own “little goodness.” Beauty arises where people work on their own little narratives of life. Truth arises where people share these experiences and together arrive at new sustainable ethical understandings. This design by Charles Taylor deserves to be reflected upon and tried out in teacher training programs and teacher rooms.

Conclusion

A radical existential perspective on truth, goodness and beauty in the context of the school should be lived out by future teachers. They should stay close to themselves and their students, should not seek immediate refuge to God for all their questions and problems, but try to be human as good, true and beautiful as possible – unconditionally, without ulterior motives, “ohne Worum-Willen” Meister Eckhart would say. They narrativize the vulnerability of their existence and then reach out to others asking, “Did you see me? Do you too dare show your vulnerability? And then, can we learn from each other?” They seek words for themselves with an eye toward meeting the other in the tent along the way. “Dichtung” and dialogue, introspection and engagement belong inextricably together in the person of the teacher, thought this way. Theopoetically, this kind of engagement has an important theological significance for the future: it makes the coming of God permeable and visible, as the revelation of a solidary God who entrusts him-/herself kenotically and sacramentally to people, their world, their schools and their RE.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

²² *Ibid.*, 185-190.

²³ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 567.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 579.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 257. Charles Taylor refers to Pope Francis’ encyclical “Fratelli Tutti” (*ibid.*, 580-581).

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Bert Roebben, “Deus semper maior”. “Radical existentialism as a point of reference for religious educational leadership in Western Europe”, *Educatio* [En ligne], 15| 2025. URL : <http://revue-educatio.eu>

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