

# Chapter 4

## How Much and Which Theology in Religious Education? On the Intimate Place of Theology in the Public Space of the School

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### Introduction

The starting point of this chapter is the contemporary school in Europe. It has been developing in recent years into a highly organized institution with many procedures of professionalism and accountability. Every school (private or public) is expected to contribute to the common good and to demonstrate the adequacy of its contribution. Schools prepare children and young people to participate with their competences and skills in the society of the future. When this condition is fulfilled, knowledge can accumulate and wealth can grow. Children and young people will then, in their turn, enjoy the commodities of this knowledge and wealth. In this chapter I raise serious questions about this instrumentalisation of young people and their talents in school and society today.

In the light of the human dignity of the person – including that of every child, adolescent and young adult – the aim of education should not be socialization into consumer society, but humanization, understood as ‘growing in shared humanity’ (Roebben, 2013, pp. 201–204). In the framework of a compendium of Catholic voices in education, I believe that this prophetic stance should not be neglected. Moreover, it is my firm contention that Catholic Religious Education (Catholic RE) can fulfil this critical role within the school and can make others (and itself!) aware of the permanent need of broadening the educational scope – from socialization to humanization. In the European learning space, there is a long-standing tradition of churches and faith communities affiliating with schools and educational institutions to reach this scope. The interesting part is the re-conceptualization and re-vitalization of these (in Europe mainly Catholic, Protestant and Islamic) faith-based voices in schooling today. The author of this paper is a Catholic theologian and has been for

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many years involved in the praxis and scientific study of RE teacher education in the Dutch-speaking (Leuven in Flanders/Belgium and Tilburg in the South of the Netherlands) and German-speaking (Dortmund in the German Ruhr-area) parts of Western Europe. The least that can be said is that the body of knowledge in RE is growing steadily against the backdrop of the developments described above. Theologians and educationalists are meeting regularly in international RE conferences and research groups (such as ISREV, EUFRES, EFTRE, etc.) and have been influencing in many ways the broader educational discourse going on in the post-secular society.

One has however to admit that it is mostly Protestant scholars who are pushing forward this discourse and that their Catholic colleagues are often lacking. Unveiling the reasons for this relative absence would be another paper to write. Personally I believe that a specific approach to theology in Catholic RE, namely, a dogmatic-affirmative approach, cannot address adequately the contemporary complexities of RE which teachers and students have to deal with. What is needed today is a more biographical-explorative understanding of Catholic RE to face the moral and religious reality depicted above. *Fides qua* (the life of faith) can challenge and reframe *fides quae* (the content of faith) today. They are complementary. In the past, the content-of-faith dimension of Catholic RE was overstressed. On reading this chapter it will hopefully become clear what a new theological orientation of Catholic RE, based on the life-of-faith dimension, could look like. There is still a lot of work to be done: e.g. the fundamental-theological implications of this orientation have not been sufficiently considered yet. Therefore, this paper is an invitation to Catholic as well as non-Catholic colleagues in the field to delve deeper into this difficult practical-theological and fundamental-theological issue.

This chapter starts with exploring the thesis that in the field of tension between the intimacy of theology and the public discourse of the contemporary school, the public-theological role of RE needs to be reconsidered. Again, this effort can be made on the basis of a reflection on the dignity of the human person, fully flourishing in his/her own right and in the light of solidarity understood as ‘intersubjective creativity’ (Helmut Peukert, as cited in Grümme, 2013, p. 61). The point will be made in three steps by (1) requalifying the German concept of ‘Bildung’ in school and RE, (2) reconceptualizing the role of theology in RE and finally by (3) proposing a kenotic-theological concept of RE.

## Requalifying Education in School

The German concept of *Bildung* [edification] thoroughly relates to the concept of responsibility – the ‘ability to respond’ authentically as a particular human being to the universal questions facing humanity (Mette, 2005; Schweitzer, 2003). This responsibility is of course always located contextually and developed gradually – on a specific place on earth and within the specific life span of the person (Roebben, 2013, pp. 43–63). As was argued in the Introduction, this personalist concept of

education is deeply contested in today's society (Roebben, 2011, 2012a). Human beings have the right to grow up as human beings, to live and to die as human beings. This generic goal may not be understood and instrumentalized as a means for something else. There is always a human being behind/in the pupil attending school. Good education or *Bildung* should contribute to the integrity of this human being, should empower him/her to become the narrator of his/her own story – coherent and fulfilled. This educational ideal needs to be reformulated over and over again.

No human being is complete, everybody is vulnerable. Moreover, human beings are not exchangeable. Everybody is unique and radically different from the other. These two characteristics – vulnerability and uniqueness – culminate in the basic experience of the otherness of the other. Human beings are radically strange to one another, and precisely in this regard, they are 'delivered' to each other in language and communication. There is no other way to become human, unless by education and dialogue. It is contended that in a globalized world, which is struggling vehemently with an economic but above all a spiritual crisis, a renewed reflection on 'living and learning in the presence of the other' (Roebben, 2012b) is urgently needed. Solidarity is not only a moral educational goal; it is an indispensable character trait of human flourishing, of humanity and therefore of human survival (Roebben, 2011, pp. 43–60).

In European educational policy, this awareness is not absent, but is snowed under other regulations. For instance, in the PISA research (measuring the 'first grade' skills of European pupils such as reading, writing, counting, observing natural phenomena, etc.), the 'second grade' competences (such as responsible and meaningful action) are mentioned as prerequisites for integrating first grade skills into a solid personhood, but are not evaluated as such in concrete school situations throughout Europe (Grill, 2011, pp. 230–231). They are seemingly not in the statistical picture. Everybody however knows that 'personal competence' – being 'a person of one piece', being 'a plain, downright fellow' – is a necessary prerequisite for the good life, but is to be considered at the same time, and also paradoxically, the aim of the good life (see the works of Alasdair MacIntyre) and of good education (see the works of Richard S. Peters). Becoming a human being is a lifetime learning process.

The teacher, who carefully and responsibly accompanies children and young people in their search for the good life and who brings them together with fellow human beings in meaningful learning circles, needs to support them and confront them with deep layers of existential orientation. This is the main reason why I sincerely believe that we need to reframe our learning circles into 'spiritual' learning communities (Roebben, 2014), in which the biographies (the 'talents') of children and young people are made accessible through narration, communication and imagination, in which they explore and learn to articulate the mystery of their bios. This is what I meant originally – and what was often misunderstood – with a mystagogical-communicative or narthical approach to (religious) education (Roebben, 2013, pp. 111–126). It is not an issue of going back to a premodern concept of (catechetical) instruction as the basis of general education. It is all about the question into what kind of hermeneutic space we are welcoming our future generations. Do we have a clue? As far as I can see, a young person has the right to 'soul food'. When he/she is hungry, the teacher should not explain how the digestive tract works

(A. Biesinger, as cited in Roebben, 2013, p. 17), but should be providing soul food on the table of learning!

## Reconceptualizing Theology in RE

The aims and processes of RE have been discussed over and over during the last decades, as was argued in the Introduction. The body of (empirical and hermeneutical, philosophical and theological, psychological, sociological and educational) research in RE is immense and need not be repeated here. In line with my argument, namely, that, for the future of the globe, personal human flourishing needs to be thought of and executed in radical solidarity with fellow human beings, I believe we need to learn to readdress our deeper convictions ‘in the presence of the other’ (Roebben, 2013, pp. 161–164). Discovering orientation in a variety of belief systems and world views is the huge RE project for the coming era. In some countries in Europe the aim of learning about world views’ is of central importance. In other countries the personal ‘learning from world views’ is more at stake. But in most cases, teachers and scholars are aware of the dialectic of the two – how the ‘adolescent lifeworld curriculum’ interferes with and shapes the ‘religious lifeworld curriculum’ and vice versa, to put it in the words of the English RE scholars John Hull and Michael Grimmitt (see Bates, 2006, pp. 20–22). The pivotal point in all of this is the connection of values and norms with ‘world views’ (van der Kooij, de Ruyter, & Miedema, 2013), with deeper existential layers of decision making and orientations in life. Young people do ask for a place in school where this existential competence can be learned and appropriated, as the evidence in empirical research is showing us (just to mention three Western European examples: Gates, 2006; Miedema, 2013; Riegel & Ziebertz, 2007).

But does the school need theology for this kind of ‘world view’ RE? In some European countries (such as Albania and France), RE and theology are completely absent in school. In other countries (such as Slovenia), RE is reduced to a mere catechetical approach only in a small number of denominational schools, which then implies that an official church theology or catechism is taught. In several countries, RE is under pressure and replaced by other subjects, such as ethical formation, education for democratic citizenship, human rights education, etc. In these cases world views and religions are then, when relevant to the topic, considered from a mere ‘religious studies’ point of view. Theology is then seen as too sectarian, too much inner circle and in some cases indoctrinatory.

Even in countries such as Germany with a traditional but open-minded confessional approach to RE, the question is raised whether or not theology still can be the connective science (*Bezugswissenschaft*) for RE, whether or not it is still able to address educationally the changing position of religions and world views in society (Mette, 2012, p. 338). In the United States, with its constitutional separation between church and state, some authors contend that RE should not be taught at all as a separate school subject, let alone as a theologically rooted school subject. It is held that it should only be mentioned as a cultural phenomenon in history, culture and social

science classes, in order to overcome ‘religious illiteracy’ (Moore, 2007). Even when RE is taught in private Catholic schools as a separate subject in the United States, it should not have a theological foundation, because of the same anxiety, namely, that this RE could then be sectarian, read catechetical, according to Kieran Scott (2001). So, theology seems to be dangerous when it enters the school yard!

A completely new approach is urgently needed. Instead of adjusting an academic and/or official church theology to the RE classroom, we need to head for new and exciting theological ways of dealing with the (religious and nonreligious) world views of children and adolescents in RE. It implies another, radically opposite mindset. Our students are already using and producing theology in their own right. They create their own theologies – visions on how the human being with his/her existential questions and answers is relating to the universality of the earth and the cosmos, visions on response-ability for the well-being of oneself and others and visions on the deep sanctity of personhood between birth and death (Sellmann, 2012). One must admit that these visions are often not reflected, unarticulated, not filled with language and with traditional elements of religious socialization and performative action. It is true that these visions often remain blind and thus cannot deliver their full human potential. RE can then offer a language to create a safe space for understanding oneself as a vulnerable pilgrim in life. RE can then be considered to be ‘the process of exploring spiritual experience through the conceptual frameworks provided by religious texts’, according to the Jewish religious educationalist Deborah Court (2013, p. 254). This process can even create new religious language and, in a reflected way, also new theological patterns. The crucial issue is however that teachers ought to listen carefully to the voices of their students, to theologize with them and to focus with them on the ‘expressive aims’ (p. 257) of their various existential visions. It is precisely there that lies the challenge for the revitalization of theological intimacy in the public realm of RE in school.

The German research project ROTH (*Religionsunterricht als Ort der Theologie*: RE as the space for theology) is based on this assumption. It argues that within the realm of the public school, the intimacy of theology has its legitimate place. At school four different educational rationalities or logics are functioning and being taught: the cognitive logic (e.g. natural sciences and mathematics), the aesthetic-expressive logic (e.g. arts and languages), the evaluative-normative logic (e.g. social sciences) and the religious-constitutive logic (e.g. religion) (J. Baumert, as cited in Mette, 2012, pp. 349–350). In the RE classroom this latter logic is taught *sui generis*, when deep existential questions and ‘ultimate concerns’ (see. Paul Tillich) are formulated and discussed. The language of theology is the specific vehicle for this logic. It provides biblical, systematic, historic and practical arguments for the ongoing reflection on life and death, on good and evil, on past and future, etc., but it especially makes the user of this language hermeneutically aware of the vulnerability of his/her reasoning when facing life in this respect (Englert, 2007, p. 215). The language of theology (*fides quaerens intellectum*: faith seeking understanding) is a rather ‘soft’ language and has been in recent RE too often replaced by other ‘hard’ language games, especially by empirical, aesthetic, semantic and didactical shortcuts of RE. Too much data and actions, too many words and methods were

adopted in RE, so that the original theological questions of young people themselves could often not surface and were neglected (Englert, 2013, pp. 36–50). The ‘how’ and ‘what’ questions in RE threw the ‘why’ questions into the shadow. The German religious educationalist Rudolf Englert (2013) proposes therefore a return to a sound theological language system, in which the questions of young people can resonate.

The German movement of children’s theology (*Kindertheologie*) has for many years attracted attention to the right of children to theology that is deeply connected to their everyday existential concerns and their (absent or present) religious language (Roebben, 2013, pp. 127–141). The so called *Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie* (Annual for children’s theology) has been published for the 14th time. In 2013 the first *Jahrbuch für Jugendtheologie* (Annual for youth theology) saw the light. The least one can say is that this ecumenical-theological movement is challenging in many ways the academic and official church theologies. It supports an emancipatory, democratic and biographical-explorative (instead of a dogmatic-affirmative) approach to RE. Theology is not the privilege of academic theologians or church ministers, but lies in the hands of every person who seriously tries to understand his/her attachment to ‘ultimate concerns’. This can happen in the RE classroom.

Understood as ‘lay theology’ (Schlag & Schweitzer, 2011, pp. 22–24 and pp. 47–51), as god-talk in the hands of ordinary people (Astley, 2002), children and young people do have the right and do have the abilities to ‘use and produce’ theology (or better: theologies). The German religious educationalist Friedrich Schweitzer has coined the three moments of this process of theologising: theology *of* children (listening carefully and empathetically to their religious language, the way they understand revelation and God’s presence in our world), theology *with* children (helping them in finding good questions and solid appropriate answers, or when the answers cannot be found, to leave these good questions open) and theology *for* children (showing the courage of one’s own convictions as an adult and telling them about the solid answers one has found as an adult).

My personal stance as an RE scholar is situated in the ‘theology *with* children’ part. I truly believe that through authentic religious communication in RE, the often implicit theology of children can be made explicit and can be confronted in a fruitful way with more systematic elements of theology for children. Implicit and explicit are two subjective dimensions of the personal reflection on one’s own faith. Interpretation and argumentation of this faith on the basis of academic and official church theologies are two more objective steps in this process (according to Schlag, 2013, p. 16). What is the chronology of this enterprise, of this ‘doing theology’ in RE? What comes first, what comes later? Here is my proposal: (1) Start with an experiential awareness and performance of the sacred with kids, (2) invite students to come up with ‘thick descriptions’ of these experiences and (3) develop together with them a theologically reflected language on the basis of this learning process. Religious communication (theology *with* children) should be maximized in all the three steps. This *with* dimension should be the pivotal point of the whole learning process.

Religious learning <i>in the presence of others</i>		
Theologizing <i>with</i> children and young people		
RE that <i>rocks</i> – in three steps		
Experience	Interpretation of this experience	Theological conceptualization of this interpretation
Performance	Thick description	Meta-reflection
Playing ( <i>on stage</i> )	Storytelling ( <i>back stage</i> )	Discussing and writing ( <i>after stage</i> )

It is a misunderstanding to think that within this process every external input should be kept aside. It is indeed even more complicated: Within every step of the communication (of the *with* dimension), input should be given. Religious experiences should be made possible, thick descriptions should be exemplified, and theologically reflected language should be handed over (Schweitzer, 2013, pp. 19–20) – so that the maximum can happen. Without ‘expressive aims’ (see above) the vague experiences would remain blind and unarticulated. Thus, children should not be left alone in their search for meaning. Within the complexity of late modern (de-traditionalized and multireligious) societies, RE teachers are not allowed to leave students alone with their own moral and religious identity formation but should bring them didactically into exciting ‘narthical playgrounds’ (Roebben, 2013, pp. 111–126), into enriching ‘green pastures’ of (1) performance, (2) thick description and (3) meta-reflection, where their imagination is stirred up by Bible and other faith stories, classical texts, meaningful others and sacred spaces and practices, to mention only a few.

There are too many strategic voices on RE being uttered in the public space of the school these days. In order to justify or to safeguard the subject RE in the curriculum, huge concessions with regard to a personal appropriation of the content are being made. On both sides of the spectrum, at the catechetical (for instance, Franchi, 2013) and at the religious studies side (for instance, Vermeer, 2013) of RE, the risk occurs that the subject becomes empty, a mere transmission of external information, a mere cognitive reproduction without inner appropriation of the central ‘soul awareness’ of RE. The subject could then be saved within the public realm of the school, but would lose its intimate soul.

## Towards a Kenotic-Theological Concept of RE

The reader of this chapter has hopefully become convinced of the need of ‘lots of theology’ for a good and soulful RE. The question however is: *Which* theology is needed? This is not an easy question and depends largely on the epochal position of theology within society, church and academia. Basically, it is clear that this theology should be a comprehensive theology, approachable through many gate ways, genuinely vulnerable in its exposures, as it is handed over in the hands of ordinary or lay people (see above in para. 2 the qualifications of Astley and Schlag/Schweitzer), as it is entering the public space of the playground of the school and the stage of the classroom.



My proposition is a kenotic-theological concept of RE, modelled by and analogous to the incarnational dynamic of the revelation (see Roebben, 2013, pp. 201–211). In the Christian tradition, God becomes human in Jesus Christ and radically shares our vulnerable human existence. In involving himself in the lives of ordinary (or ‘lay’) people, he expresses his solidarity with them and his promise of ultimate healing and eschatological sanctification. Jesus is the exegete of God; in the gospel we learn from him what it means to be ‘a plain, downright fellow’ (see above, para. 1) and where this brings us.

The kenotic dimension of the Christian revelation gives shape to a specific theology for RE. In RE we paradoxically teach ‘letting go’, we exercise ourselves in listening to the voice of future generations and their interpretation of the good life. According to the American practical theologian Tom Beaudoin (2008), 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’ (p. 144). 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 them already inspired. He/she provides room for the creative work of young people, for their craving within a creation that is groaning as in the pains of childbirth (Van Erp, 2007, p. 28). This ‘practice of dispossession’ (Geerinck, 2004) within RE is, according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a ‘descent into secret discipline’ (see Beaudoin, 2008, pp. 144–147) that is even hidden for the teacher in RE. What the child or the young person finally appropriates out of the learning process, what he/she takes away as soul food from the table, cannot be planned in RE. Taking away is an act of freedom. The RE provision only needs to prepare the table of the secret discipline.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church 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. (Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae, 170)

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 (Hay and Nye, 1998). This is precisely what Karl Rahner meant when he argued that we need a theology of childhood, of vulnerabil-



ity and radical openness, when it comes finally to the act of faith, to the double act of ‘decentration and dedication’ (Roebben, 2014, p. 307). This disposition of receptive learning, of learning with ‘open hands’, is at the centre 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’ (Roebben, 2014). Authentic RE is in this regard always a soteriological act (Astley, 2012, p. 259) or an act of ‘healing’. In the end good RE restores the communication, narration and spiritual flourishing of the person and the community.

## Conclusion

There are at least three remaining questions. Where and how does the RE teacher find the necessary spiritual resources in order to survive the school system (see para. 1), in which he/she is caught between the ‘large and undefinable human possibilities and for ever-present constraints’? How can he/she cultivate a state of ‘tenacious humility’ (Hansen, 2001, p. 167), in addressing children in their spiritual journey? This is even more an issue for the RE teacher: Where can he/she find a space for his/her personal theologising? Often it is the case that the teacher only can do so in the classroom, together with the pupils. Is that a healthy situation? I would answer: not at all. Teachers deserve better: they need more support in their spiritual and theological quest.

A second question relates to the specific historical and contextual character of the RE provision: How can Catholic RE (and any RE!) consolidate its risky position in schools in Europe? My proposal to revitalize the theological dimension of RE needs to be addressed in every country and school system separately – be it confessional or non-confessional. My contention was and is that children and young people have the right to address the depth of life in a spiritual way and that they are allowed to develop their own praxis, language and even conceptual theology within the framework of the given RE provision.

And finally: How can this new approach to RE – a new practice of theology in RE considered to be constitutive for a new *Catholic* RE – open a deeper conversation on the fundamental theology of Catholics? As I argued in the beginning of this paper, a lot of work still needs to be done. The groundwork is there though. The Second Vatican Council has opted for an idea of ‘risky revelation’ (Sellmann, 2012, p. 88; Roebben, 2013, pp. 240–241), revelation in the hands of human beings, with the risk of tragedy, open to understanding and misunderstanding, but at least open for the authentic human journey. The Second Vatican Council has argued that the *fides qua* (the life of faith) should challenge and reframe the *fides quae* (the content of faith). The Second Vatican Council thus affirmed the *pastorale Grammatik der Lehre* (‘the pastoral grammar of its teaching’, according to Hans-Joachim Sander) or its *pastoralité* (Christoph Theobald). This is also how I understand Pope Francis’ pastoral words in an interview with the *New York Times* (19th of September 2013).

In line with my schema above, I consider these thoughts as the theological conceptualization of the interpretation of the religious experience of Pope Francis. They can be read at the end of this chapter as the meditation of ‘a plain, downright fellow’ in faith,

If one has the answers to all the questions – that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble. (...) Our life is not given to us like an opera libretto, in which all is written down; but it means going, walking, doing, searching, seeing. ... We must enter into the adventure of the quest for meeting God; we must let God search and encounter us. (Pope Francis, 2013)

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