

The Lustre of Life

Hermeneutic-communicative concept of religious education

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In this contribution I intend to focus on the Christian image of man that provides the basis of the hermeneutic-communicative model of Roman Catholic education. Roman Catholic religion as a subject is confessional by nature and in orientation because the religious educator's point of departure is not from a type of neutral anthropology (one that does not exist anyway), but is clearly coloured by a very specific image of man that comes from the Jewish and Christian tradition. In the Genesis story we read that man is the image of God. This is a strange statement, because in the Hebrew bible it is clearly stated that it is forbidden to make images of God. How can God create man in His image and likeness, while at the same time we are forbidden to identify and worship images of God? This paradoxical question can only be answered by accepting that there is a reality hidden in man that also cannot be depicted or defined or placed in human or scientific categories such as we have in biology, psychology or sociology. Put simply, there is more to discern in man than is visible. The 'lustre' of human beings is always more than their genes, the colour of their skin, their gender, character, origins, occupation, social standing, nation, people or religion. A human being by definition escapes being characterised by any of these aspects (traditionally people spoke of human beings as being bearers of a 'soul'). This is something we all experience when we have and raise children: they always are and will always turn out different from what we try to plan and bring about through our own desires and care. It is something they always manage to escape to some extent (though usually not completely). This, in a positive sense, means that a human being is a 'life-filled' 'image of God', is receptive and has the ability to be creative in the development of his or her own life. It means that not everything about being human is or can be predetermined. This is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian inspired anthropology that underlies the hermeneutic-communicative model of religious education.

In this paper we identify the nature of man as a 'fragile hermeneutical space'. The essence of a human being consists of a radical openness to reality, an essential indeterminateness, an ability to transcend his or her own reality. Unlike with animals that do contain traces of the divine creator, God is not expressed in the face of a person through the physical features but rather through what is revealed in those features as facial expression, as radical ungraspability and indeterminacy. This means that people have an inbuilt receptiveness to meaning (the "lustre" of life): we discover and we ascribe meaning and we are also capable of recognizing and acknowledging others as people in search of meaning, longing for meaning and absorbers of

meaning. One of the tasks of religious education is to allow children and young people to discover this hermeneutical space within themselves and others: to discover the highs and lows of life, beauty and comfort, pain and suffering, mystery and the incomprehensible, the forgiving nature and hard edge of reality, but also: our frail, vulnerable and excluded fellow human beings, the fragility of nature. The intention of Catholic religion as a subject is to explore this hermeneutical space and open it up even more in children and young people so that they can read reality with philosophical spectacles and discover that nothing is normal, obvious or simple. This anthropology assumes that every human being, without exception, religious or non-religious, Christian or otherwise, is characterized by this openness and that, by way of this openness, this indeterminacy, the given of existence, everyone has to sort out his or her own thinking, and that everyone can create, discover and exchange sense, nonsense, meaning and orientation within this openness. It is through this shared openness that all people are also structurally linked as relational beings. To sum up: one of the principal objectives of Catholic religion as a subject is to awaken ideological reflection in all the students by allowing them to discover this hermeneutical space, no matter what they do with it in their further lives.

We call this space a fragile hermeneutical space because this openness to reality makes us particularly vulnerable. These days there are many players in the market for meaning, ideology and politics that give interpretation and shape to this space. There is no longer an overarching philosophical system that offers a completely conclusive and satisfying answer to all the questions and possibilities, temptations and threats that crop up within the hermeneutical space. Reality – also our own inner reality - is radically marked by a form of polyphony, by a multiplicity of voices, by plurality. The hermeneutical space is fragile because it is exposed, even to fundamentalism and fanaticism. Fundamentalism presents a false promise of stability and security, often at the expense of others and oneself. Likewise relativism and nihilism are constantly lurking, making everything the same, containing nothing that is absolute. Phenomena such as a complete absence of standards and norms and senseless violence can be extreme manifestations of this. They both also threaten to destroy one's own space and that of others. Fundamentally the hermeneutical space is always fragile because cutting across all that is understood and 'words of life', life continues to present itself in challenging and innovative ways in people's experiences of joy and pain. This can sometimes be in the form of real groundbreaking experiences that force (young) people to listen differently to words of life. But even in less extreme cases, the hermeneutical space of human beings is fragile and manipulable. Since all the great stories are 'cases', there is the pitfall that the liberal market economy that is a strong operating force makes itself at home in human desire and quietly manifests itself as the only valid important story for man and society: the story of human existence is reduced to an endless chain of production and consumption. People respond to the meanings created by the economy which often take over and fill the hermeneutical space with a desire for economic goods and the social status attached to these. Young people often do not realize how this whole process is being driven by the blind law of profit maximization and lose sight of how this process creates victims, both fellow human beings and the ecological system. The rapid

succession of economic crises and the recent flare-ups of violence in major cities also increasingly expose this ideology as a false bringer of good fortune.

This analysis gives rise to a second important objective for Catholic religion as a subject, namely, to make students aware of the plurality of views of life, philosophies, ideologies and religions that characterize today's reality - both for the individual and the community - and to try to influence our interpretation of reality. An analysis like this can, on the one hand, open many horizons within our own hermeneutical space, but, on the other hand, it can also be deconstructive, particularly in the degree in which the ideologies manipulate and close one's own hermeneutical space or that of others and even destroy it. In this sense, religion as a subject also keeps performing a critical role in the classroom, church and society. It not only confirms the prevailing plurality, but also calls it into question. In this sense, religion as a subject can never be relativistic and the religious educator never neutral. Not everything is the same. Whoever or whatever threatens one's hermeneutical space or that of others and of creation, will be questioned by the teacher of religion in the name of the image of God in every human being. This also means that there is no room for religious indoctrination in the subject of religion, nor for racism or other violations of human rights. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges of the subject is the historical legacy of the religions themselves and the fact that their language, their structure and their history are often more likely to close than open up the hermeneutical space, to surround it with scepticism rather than open it up; to obscure than liberate. In this "fragile" area, in particular, it is a challenge to give the "lustre" of experiencing and living that occurs in the lives of young people themselves a diffident place in the hermeneutic-communicative approach.

Ultimately the subject of religion needs to create a context in which each student is invited to look at life in a personal way. We can call this the third important objective of Roman Catholic religion as a subject. The basic premise is that the hermeneutical space of each person is already filled or occupied in a particular way. No one is neutral. Everyone has already been touched by life. We are all different. We have all already made choices. We are not completely autonomous creatures. Many choices have already been made for us, even before we were born. This is also true of religious elements which we have integrated or rejected in a certain way. We are always already thrown into life and affected by reality, both in a positive and a negative way. Everyone carries truth within, but nobody can lay claim to having the full truth. No one is without evil. Perhaps the latter is also the true meaning of the theological concept of original sin. Nobody has the perfect answer to every question. No one can escape responsibility for others or take perfect responsibility. No one is totally free or starts with a clean slate. A hermeneutical approach aims to invite students to find their own philosophical assumptions

and feelings, to make them aware of complementary and alternative possibilities and to invite them to allow the internal and external diversity to develop into a polyphonic identity that is as integrated as possible, though the development never stops. The aim of the subject these days is not for all the students to become or turn into Christians or Catholics. However it is true that the intention is that the students should be invited to come to philosophical self-enlightenment and maturity in complete freedom and to teach them to deal with ideological differences and diversity in themselves and in society.

The search for one's own identity or profoundest individuality involves much more than and even something fundamentally different from a rational or purely autonomous choice. After all, we cannot choose our identity. Our identity has been largely preformed and involves visible but also invisible loyalties concerning which we actually did not have a choice and which in fact leave us no choice, but which do to a significant extent create and shape and provide the basis of our identity. Our identity has been largely coloured for us by the fears and dreams of our parents, the structure and type of life of the family we come from and the place that we gained in it, the schools we visited, the friends we have or have not made, the books that we did or did not read, the poetry and the music we have heard, the bad things and suffering that happened to us, the people we met by chance, the cultural environment, traditions, the spirit of the age, and so on. We can to some extent develop an awareness of our situation and also of what is subjective, irrational or suprarational in it and we can actively take on, adjust, enrich, intensify or even rationalize or reject our situation in life.

In the subject of religion this process of becoming aware always takes place in a process of communication. Students bring different ideological perspectives, which they have often assumed from a kind of initially naive position, into what happens in the classroom. Years ago that would in many cases have been a Catholic perspective, but these days, it is no longer a Catholic or Christian perspective. The subject of religion will recognize, give explicit attention to and value these ideological and religious differences. It is precisely in the confrontation with differences that a more conscious philosophical choice, a "second naive position", can be developed. This happens especially when the teacher is confronted in the lesson with hermeneutical junction points or interpretation conflicts concerning central life issues among the students. It is the teacher's responsibility to moderate the philosophical discussion around this and to offer insights from his own Christianity. This is a delicate task, for students also sometimes feel deeply connected, attached and loyal to certain opinions, values, symbols, traditions, etc. Communication on hermeneutical junction points is different from an intellectual exercise or choosing a standpoint from a supermarket of beliefs. It is a matter of

discovering our own intertwinedness with reality and to allow oneself to be touched by new and different viewpoints: intellectual, but often also social, aesthetic and spiritual viewpoints. An 'affinity' with the interior of life as it can be observed in our own lives and the lives of others. In this sense, the subject of religion also has an important social role and responsibility. It makes students more competent and makes them sensitive to the ideological, inter-life philosophical and interreligious dialogue where everyone can be or can find him or herself. It is important that everyone is allowed to speak from his or her own ideological position and is not forced into a neutral or indifferent position before he or she is allowed to say something. People only grow in philosophical competence when they have also been invited, challenged and valued to speak from their own perspective. People do not learn how to be philosophically engaged if they are compelled to put their own view between brackets or have not even explored it. In a positive sense, this means that the subject of Roman Catholic religion makes room for all philosophies and religions as long as they continue to acknowledge the openness and therefore the fundamental freedom of others.

What is it that makes the topic of this subject Roman Catholic religion rather than philosophy of life or search for meaning? The point of departure of the hermeneutic-communicative model itself is already not neutral, but has been coloured ideologically by the Jewish and Christian traditions. The principle that man is marked by the ability to transcend himself and to make create and perceive meaning is already coloured confessionally. One might also assume that the search for meaning itself is meaningless and that man is ultimately only a sophisticated chimpanzee that can be completely explained by the theory of evolution and infrahuman processes from biology, psychology and sociology. In that case truth, for example, becomes a pragmatic notion, goodness a regulating principle, beauty a subjective feeling. In addition, those with no faith or a different faith also have very authentic experiences of truth, goodness and beauty and they too can experience the self-transcending wealth of the hermeneutical space.

The hermeneutic-communicative model for the subject of Roman Catholic religion assumes that the hermeneutical space of the human being is not just open to the 'immanent transcendence', to experiences of truth, goodness and beauty, but is also characterized by a much more radical openness, particularly, an openness to the 'transcendent transcendence'. Ultimately it is this connection to the Transcendent that colours and directs everything. The organizers and very often the young people expect the Roman Catholic religion teacher to live steeped in this Transcendence and that this helps the teacher to clarify experience and to speak in witness. At the same time it is important to underline that this transcendence in the Christian tradition is also marked by immanence through the confession of a God who in history was incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth, who is Christ (see below).

In light of this analysis the relationship with God could be described as a break-through into the hermeneutical space of something radically different that connects, fills, anchors and unifies what I can not connect, fill, anchor and unify through my own efforts, but what I still have a deep longing for. For a believer to experience and meet God is like bathing in a light that comes from elsewhere, that creates unity and tenderness, makes one feel gratitude, brings peace, promises a future, but also instils a sense of responsibility and allows the world to be seen through different eyes. It is the responsibility of the subject of religion to show and create understanding of how people of faith can experience the hermeneutical space in this way and allow it to come into full bloom in words, stories, prayers and rituals, and at least ensure that this possibility is not blocked beforehand, even though it is often the case that religion and religious language can themselves be obstacles to such a transcendent experience of the hermeneutical space. I agree with Guido Van Heeswijck's analysis that nowadays there is a taboo on this very Transcendence. However, I do not think an actively pluralistic subject can be a sort of philosophical course prerequisite to open students to the Transcendent because openness to the personal relationship with God cannot be derived from philosophy or comparative religion. Transcendence is always self-expression of a very specific confessional faith. The confession of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ is the confession of faith that the religion teacher will need to present for discussion in the classroom.

Regarding this point I would also like to formulate a reflection in connection with the concept of 'mystagogical-communicative' religious education that is sometimes put forward as an alternative to the 'hermeneutic-communicative' model. 'Mystagogical' religious education is spontaneously understood to mean the furthering of the handling of the mystery of (human) existence, and in doing so, the mystery of God. As such this term is not used correctly from a historical point of view. After all, in the Old Church "Mystagogy" was the most advanced form of catechesis for the most highly initiated. In the early church Mystagogy was the catechesis that was given to those who were recently baptized. The term also suggests that some sort of continuity exists between immersing oneself in the mystery of reality (hence perhaps 'mystagogy') and finding the God of the Christian tradition. God does not just reveal Himself in the depth and mystery of one's own hermeneutical space, but comes to meet us from elsewhere. In order to be able to experience and meet God one must also first be initiated in a very specific set of stories, symbols, rituals, traditions, etc. that provide the means for the meeting with God in the hermeneutical space. 'Philosophical education' and 'religious education' can therefore not be regarded as the same, and one does not automatically give rise to the other. Justified criticism that religious education is often no longer religious education is,

in my view, due precisely to evident efforts to regard 'religion' and 'philosophy of life' as the same thing. The assumption here is that if life is reflected on deeply enough, God will be found. However, there is no continuous, straight or uninterrupted line between hermeneutical space and Christian faith and between a philosophy of life and religion, between mystery and mystagogy. It is therefore important that we are initiated first before we can become more profoundly Christian, just as in the Christian tradition of old when, after the evangelization, initiation catechesis was given first of all and only much later, after receiving the sacraments, mystagogical catechesis were offered. Such a mystagogical approach to religious education, as was well understood in history, is indeed rather ambitious for religious education these days, and there is a risk that use of this term could once again lead to confusion between religious education (compulsory for all) and catechesis (voluntary, for those who have already turned to Christ).

In other words, the experience of God is a very special way of dealing with the hermeneutical space. This transcendent God is not directly available just like that through the experience. He is therefore a very 'fragile God' Himself. He comes to us through a series of mediations provided to us through stories, rituals, tradition, community, etc. In Christianity, God cannot be encountered without mediation. If these means are not provided, the hermeneutical space cannot become transparent and be a medium for meeting God. This implies that at a time when Christianity, as a cultural and existential reality, has become less and less a part of the fixed horizon of Western culture, the contents of the Christian tradition must be made available more and more explicitly in religious education but in such a way that the presentation can also provide the means in this day and age, particularly if the means are actually experienced and expressed through testimony to the word.

Christians are convinced that it is precisely the revelation of God in Christ that offers a unique, irreplaceable, non-interchangeable, authentic and life-giving experience of the hermeneutical space in all dimensions of existence, not only for the individual but also for society. Christ is therefore the being whose existence has become the most transparent before God because He comes from God, is Himself the Son of God. This forms the core of the subject of Roman Catholic religion. Christianity revolves around Christ and His fragile love that shows the way right to the cross, and Roman Catholic religion as a subject is only 'Roman Catholic' if and in so far as the Catholic tradition is offered and presented as a living tradition and celebrating community that facilitates the relationship with God within the hermeneutical space in a very particular way and therefore makes it possible.

That brings me to the fourth major objective of Roman Catholic religion as a subject, which is to offer the wealth of the Christian tradition as a particular mediation structure of the relationship

with God in the hermeneutical space. Implicitly, this takes place throughout all the lessons, of course, since a religious educator does not look at man and reality from a neutral or non-confessional attitude. But perhaps the time has come to push this objective more explicitly to the fore, particularly in the professional training of expert teachers of religion. Religious educators must have something to say about the Christian tradition and the way they have integrated it in their own lives and the community. For students who are believers, this approach can have a mystagogical meaning in the true sense of the word, namely a further initiation into and deepening of religious faith. For some students this can be a first or renewed acquaintance with the Christian tradition.

The hermeneutic-communicative model also accepts and appreciates that in the case of some students the hermeneutical space is structured or oriented from a different philosophical or religious tradition, such as Islam or secular humanism. From these traditions, likewise, students can also speak and live authentically, even though they do not explicitly experience the God experienced by Christians as a guiding, life-giving and redemptive God. The Catholic anthropology should be able to accept and confirm that original sin has not completely destroyed or obscured the hermeneutical space of human beings, but that everyone is able to live morally and even in a religiously authentic way. For this reason the Church confirmed in the Second Vatican Council that it rejects nothing of what is true and holy in the various religions. "She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men" (NA 2). If religion as a subject invites and supports those with a different faith to become better Muslims or better humanists, the objective of the course has also been achieved for them.

The present curriculum, I believe, provides a fertile framework that is able, in this day and age, to meet the variety of expectations from church and society and is also able to create real added value for the individual and for society: 1. To make students more sensitive with regard to a philosophy of life, 2. to respect the plurality among the students to the very end, 3. to invite and support the student to philosophical self-enlightenment; 4. and to present the wealth of the Christian tradition in a witnessing and expert way as something that drives all the objectives. That is a service to young people, the church and society. For some the subject will give too much or too little attention to the plurality, for others too much or too little attention to the Christian tradition or too much or too little opportunity for reflection on one's own philosophical growth. The core of the subject, however, consists of engaging with the pluralistic context and the Christian tradition by means of the ears and the

mouths of the group of students. Whoever interrupts that dialogue will either be left with a pluralistic subject that cannot possibly do justice to the internal dynamics of ideologies themselves or with a catechesis that cannot possibly be made compulsory for everyone or a subject that involves navel-gazing among young people or a group of students that only have time for their own experiences.