



# Hermeneutical learning in religious education

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## Abstract

This article describes the contours of hermeneutical learning in the context of religious education. Hermeneutical learning is firstly distinguished from monoreligious learning and multireligious learning. Hermeneutical learning is based on a triple hermeneutic task: interpretation of text, context and the biography of the student, and avoids both monocorrelation and relativism. In realising this task, the concept of ‘hermeneutical intersections’ is introduced as well as criteria to deal with these ‘conflicts of interpretations’ in religious education. Finally, the role of the religious educator is developed as witness, specialist, and moderator in the hermeneutical learning process.

**Keywords** Catholic identity · Hermeneutics · Religious education

## 1 Hermeneutics in the pedagogy of religious education

It has been argued that in the twenty-first century, the pedagogy of religious education (RE) has made a ‘hermeneutic turn’ (Gefré 2001; Ziebertz 2001; Jackson 1997). Such a turn comes in response to the modern ‘experience-oriented turn’ of philosophical and religious education in the second half of the twentieth century that had emerged itself as a reaction against the more time-honoured, pre-modern approach to deductive faith transmission. The attention to human experience in the modern twentieth century not only gained a place in RE, but it was also given its own authority and power of expression, in addition to, or in connection with the Christian tradition (Bulckens 1987, 1997). I will argue that the new, post-modern hermeneutic turn in RE today cannot only be seen as a reaction or criticism against this modern vision that focused significantly on the human experience, but also and foremost as a radicalisation of it (Bowie 2016). This article addresses the question of what such radicalised contemporary ‘hermeneutical’ RE can look like (Hilgert and Kropac 2002). For students in teacher-training programs, these reflections often have an abstract character. Students do not always see what these fundamental shifts imply in the practice of RE and in the attitude of the religion teacher himself or herself. This contribution therefore also focuses on these kinds of challenges.

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## 2 Students of the 'insider' perspective

Students who opt to enter RE teacher-training programs very often seem to do so because they have been touched from within a certain philosophical or religious worldview. This interior sensitivity towards philosophy and religion may be the result of an upbringing in a religious context, or of a later immersion into a religious context outside the family in which they were touched in a transcendent way by certain beautiful or vulnerable aspects of life, either as individuals or as members of a group (e.g. a youth movement or youth chaplaincy). They start from this 'insider perspective' and want to reflect on the fundamental questions of life and faith with peers and future generations, and in this way contribute to education and society. Unlike previous generations, their desire to contribute in this way through RE comes with far more of philosophical vulnerability and an awareness of a diversity of worldviews. Even those who start with a fairly homogeneous and monolithic philosophy of life or religion soon discover that their vision is coloured by a certain perspective, is based on personal preferences, and that their religious experiences cannot easily be made 'universal'. They are helped, or sometimes forced to do so, by a theology course that exposes the inter-Christian plurality, by the phenomenological study of religions, which reveals the multitude of religions and philosophies of life, and by the confrontation that emerges during their teaching internship with the class context, which for many students in RE teacher-training is often 'disruptive' with regard to their own implicit or explicit worldviews. Many of these students have to go through a silent mourning process in which they learn to approach the evidence and the accepted or professed truth of their own convictions in a more modest way. This developmental process also involves various risks, such as resistance, rigidity, disillusionment, conflict, the urge to adapt, relativism, and even cynicism. In most cases, however, it leads to a deeper and more mature religious attitude.

## 3 Students of the 'outsider' perspective

There is also another group of students in RE teacher-training programs who often do not have such a philosophical or religious perspective from within, or who are not affected by specific philosophical, ethical, or aesthetic aspects of religion or a philosophy of life. They show a more objective interest in the phenomenon of religion(s) and want to pass on their knowledge to future generations. These students are sometimes surprised to discover that for believers, often their own fellow students, religion or philosophy of life is not just a contingent human construction of knowledge, but an engaged, committed, living reality that cannot be reduced to external characteristics and that also resists easily made and superficial comparisons. At best, these students in RE teacher-training can learn to know, understand, and, above all, appreciate the dynamic interior of worldviews and religions through theological studies, through the study of living religions, and through dialogue with fellow students and pupils they meet during their internship(s). These students will soon discover how difficult it is as an 'outsider' to do justice to the 'insider' perspective on religions and philosophies of life. Moreover, if they are sufficiently self-reflective, they will also recognise that the descriptive approach to religions always takes place from a certain perspective, and, furthermore,

from a variety of perspectives. In most cases, this awareness leads to a curious, respectful, and appreciative attitude towards religions and philosophies of life.

#### **4 What is hermeneutical learning?**

What students of both 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives have in common, is that they all discover the 'perspectivistic' character of each position in confrontation with (other) religions and worldviews. Nobody has a 'helicopter perspective' when it comes to questions of life: all are participants in a quest for value and meaning. Nobody is neutral or objective. Everyone takes a perspective 'on the ground' that is coloured by the glasses through which one looks, and this perspective is shaped even further by one's own preferences, experiences, and resistances. It is at this very moment that the possibility of 'hermeneutical learning' starts (Lombaerts 2000). This is the striving to understand things from within, in this case, religions and philosophies of life. Hermeneutics assumes that every reality is an interpreted reality, and searches for what that interpretation directs, colours, or orients, such as presuppositions, claims to truth, experiences, stories, symbols and rituals, or desires and hopes for the future. Hermeneutics always does this in relation to a certain historical, social, and existential context. The goal of hermeneutical learning is to find and expose effective interpretations of the world, in order to achieve a better understanding of things from within, in this case religions and philosophies of life. Hermeneutics thus involves a movement from the outside to the inside, from description to understanding, from experience to interpretation, from participation to dialogue, from one layer to several layers, from letter to spirit.

#### **5 From the 'insider' to the 'outsider' perspective**

The two groups of students in RE teacher-training, as outlined above, face different challenges here. Students who start from a personal perspective as insider are not always aware of the interpreted character of their philosophical or religious experience. They often see a kind of unity between their own experience and their own religious or philosophical outlook. For them, therefore, hermeneutical learning means discovering what their philosophical or religious experience carries, establishes, and shapes. This is always accompanied by a form of self-reflection, and sometimes also with a critical distance and growing awareness that things could have been different as well. In this exercise, one also discovers that the hermeneutic 'insider' perspective is always complex, multifaceted, sometimes conflicting, and at some points even unclear, inconsistent, and occasionally marked by evil and human failure. However, in order to be able to connect the inside perspective pedagogically and dialogically with the outside perspective as a (future) religion teacher, this process of self-reflection is necessary. At the same time, these students are faced with the task of accepting that it will always be possible to translate only part of the insider perspective to those who stand outside the hermeneutical circle of a particular religion or philosophy of life. This translation exercise from the inside to the outside is necessary, but always doomed, in part, to fall short. Nevertheless, teaching RE cannot be done without the willingness to take this inevitable risk (Dialogschool 2019).

## 6 From the 'outsider' to the 'insider' perspective

In hermeneutical learning, students who do not adhere to a religion or philosophy of life are encouraged to do the opposite. They allow themselves to be invited to enter into the hermeneutical perspective of a particular religion or philosophy of life. They are received hospitably, for example, in the Christian story, in a Jewish family, in an Islamic community, and so on; not so much to participate in that religion (because that is not possible), but to be a guest there. The same exercise from the outside to the inside has to be done by the students of the first group with regard to religions or philosophies to which they do not belong themselves. Such an exercise concerns more than just 'knowing' the language, the history, the rituals, and other aspects of another religion, it is also about witnessing how others experience it, find meaning in it, communicate about it, act ethically towards it, and so on. At the same time, students in this situation of being a guest will find that they will never be able to fully experience and understand the other from the inside, no matter how great the effort. For example, only a Jew can fully understand what it is to be a Jew, because only he or she feels, lives, and acts within the hermeneutic circle of Judaism. Hermeneutical learning is not 'against' experience, on the contrary, it is more aware of the radical difference between particular (religious) experiences.

## 7 Interreligious learning and conversion

The latter, however, does not mean that religions are completely closed systems of meaning. Hermeneutical learning implies that one can enter into other fields of meaning, that one can build bridges between fields of meaning, that one can, to a certain extent, 'translate' one's own philosophy of life into a language that the other can better understand (Lombaerts 2001). Hermeneutical learning will, therefore, always be a form of interreligious and interfaith learning. Such learning means that one is hospitable to the other believer, but also that one is willing to be invited by the other and to learn from him or her (Burggaeve 1991; Moyaert 2008, 2011, 2014). The intention is then to return to one's own hermeneutical space, enriched by the visit to another, with a better understanding of one's own tradition along with its possibilities and its limits. 'Conversion' is not excluded in hermeneutical learning, but it is a very drastic event in which one allows oneself to be 'absorbed' or definitively 'welcomed' into the hermeneutic space of the other and one's community. In this way, conversion is not just about moving, it is about finding a new home. This very radical event never takes place without profound changes and even a possible turning point in the life of the person concerned. In hermeneutical learning, one finds oneself more deeply, consciously, and complexly reflected in one's own ideological story, and one learns to know and understand the other with distinction in his or her hermeneutic circle. Dialogue then means trying to understand and appreciate each other's understanding (Ricoeur 1971).

## 8 Second Naïveté

Hermeneutical learning requires a great deal of effort on the part of the learning subject. With using the language of Ricoeur, such learning can also be described as the shift from a 'first naïveté' to a 'second naïveté' in dealing with one's own faith (Ricoeur 1971). The belief of the child who cannot take distance, cannot see any other perspectives, cannot take a critical attitude, and who understands everything literally, is being abandoned. This form of belief is transformed into a faith that has gone through criticism, through the confrontation with the other, and which is aware of its own complexities, vulnerabilities, and ambiguities (Burgaeve 1991). Nonetheless, in such faith, one can ('despite' and 'beyond' the 'first naïveté') commit oneself again to the mystery that believing is deeper, more authentic, and more human than they previously perceived. In James Fowler's terms, this is the transition from synthetic-conventional belief (stage three) (which is conformist), through individual-reflective belief (stage four) (which is rational and individual), to conjunctive belief (stage five) (which is complex and binding). Psychologist of religion, Dirk Hutsebaut (Leuven), speaks of 'Post-Critical Belief': believing beyond criticism (Fowler 1981, 1984, 1987, 1991, 1996; Freeman and Fowler 2002; Vergouwen 2001; Hutsebaut 1996). It is the way that every human being has to go to come to a mature belief.

## 9 Monocorrelation: no hermeneutical learning

In light of the pathway described above, there are, however, many obstacles, dead ends, and off-ramps on that road for the religion teacher in training. We will discuss a number of them here. A first off-ramp is simply to avoid the interpreted character of one's own religion or philosophy of life, or to hide it from the pupils. Such a literal belief that does not allow or need hermeneutics is easier to maintain and transfer to younger pupils than to older ones, because children can offer less resistance cognitively to it. It is often caused by the teacher's own insecurity towards engaging in a more complex religious conversation, the fear of seeing one's own religious truths questioned, or the urge 'to do well' as a RE teacher in the eyes of religious or school authorities. This approach is arguably very common among Christian (and post-Christian) teachers (in training). A central point of our analysis is the insight that an 'experience-based' twentieth century approach to religious education can also contribute to this position and perpetuate this same attitude. Many religion teachers start from the experience of the pupils and then bridge ('correlate') that experience to elements of the Christian tradition, in order to finally integrate these Christian elements back into the experience (Dillen 2015). A one-to-one relationship is assumed between 'the' human experience and 'the' Christian message. This correlation methodology often leaves little room for complexity and difference, but creates a 'perfectly' closed circle. In fact, this is a form of literal belief that uses the detour of experience to prove itself and impose itself on the experience of the other. It is quite explicitly not a form of hermeneutical learning. Such a didactic approach works quite mechanically and always uses the same three steps (experience, tradition, experience). The strategy is predictable and controllable. The teacher does not even have to invest himself or herself too deeply in this strategy; complexity is seen as too challenging or even dangerous for the students. Such a correlative teaching method is harmonising, but also recuperative with regard to the

human experience. All aspects of the experience that cannot be interpreted in the Christian faith are filtered out or silenced, and all aspects of the Christian faith that cannot be harmonised with the human experience are discarded or silenced. The result is often a kind of domesticated Christianity: good, sweet, friendly, and in this way, hopefully welcoming and appealing for all. This can be described as 'monocorrelation': the repeated and exclusive linking of experience (in the singular) with the tradition (in the singular), as if both simply coincide. Both experience and tradition pay a price in this approach that actually seeks to induce a hidden form of literal belief. Tradition, in this process, is very often reduced to horizontal humanism ('life lessons'), and pupils do not always feel that they are taken seriously in the individuality of their experience. As pupils grow older, they often turn not only against such monocorrelation as a didactic tool but also against religion itself, which they consider to be an imperfect or irrelevant interlocutor in dealing with the real, complex, and sometimes disruptive experiences that they have. Nevertheless, many religion teachers feel safe in this approach. Little personal engagement is expected and the difficult questions that make a claim to personal faith life can be avoided.

## 10 Pluralism: no hermeneutical learning

There is a second way to avoid hermeneutical learning that is more to be found in the second group of RE student teachers outlined above who are not philosophically or religiously committed themselves. These students tend to feel most at home in a pluralistic approach that defines religions as human constructions created in a particular historical and social context. That is, religions are all ('just') human interpretations of reality. This approach can also be strongly experience-oriented. In this view, one starts with some general human experiences, for example, the experience of new life or death, and then different religions and philosophies of life are seen as human interpretations of this general human experience, relative to place and time. These different constructions can thus be described and compared to each other. The teacher remains outside the description and leaves the final choice to the pupil. This approach works well with older pupils, but also faces several kinds of problems. After all, this approach is also very harmonising and does not tolerate any real difference. The only way to participate positively in the learning process is to be prepared to submit oneself to the relativism of this equalising approach. In other words, this approach cannot be reconciled with particularities that are opposed to pluralism. In this way, there is a risk of making pluralism itself into a kind of new religion in the classroom to which everyone must adhere in order to be able to participate fruitfully in the learning process. The particularity of a religion or philosophy of life that resists to such pluralism has no place here. The problem with this approach is that it excludes the possibility of understanding religions from within. To the contrary, however, religions are not different interpretations of the same universal human experience; religions establish new worlds with their own unique experiences. In other words, a believer does not just 'employ' certain forms of human experience for informing one's faith, but rather religions create different human experiences altogether. Religions and philosophies of life open up different, partly overlapping, fields of meaning, which cannot simply be deconstructed into contingent human experiences of the infinite. For these RE student teachers, hermeneutical learning means tracing the various 'hermeneutics' that are at work, as well as their own pluralistic hermeneutics that they may use to approach such philosophical multiplicity.

## 11 The triple hermeneutic task: text, context, biography

What does the dynamics of hermeneutical learning consist of? Here we can speak of a triple hermeneutic task. The RE student teacher must become aware of the hermeneutics of the tradition, the hermeneutics of the current context, and the hermeneutics of oneself as the interpreting subject (Aldridge 2018; Standish 2014). In the first place, the student teacher must become aware of the way(s) in which the tradition understands itself: the hermeneutics of the tradition. This is discussed in the basic theological training and exposes the versatility, internal plurality, and richness of the tradition, as well as the ambiguities, and tensions therein (Carswell 2018). It teaches us which view of God, humanity, and the world supports the tradition, and how there is a dynamism and coherence that permeates and colours the entire existence of the believer, and creates space for specific religious experiences.

There is also the hermeneutics of the context. This concerns the multitude of philosophical perspectives that are found today and how our context deals with them. The student teacher learns that there is a multitude of partly overlapping, partly conflicting hermeneutics at work. Special attention is paid here to the context of a contemporary liberal democracy and how it tries to deal with religiosity, usually in the form of a formal tolerance. Such hermeneutics of context also involves the way in which one's own and other traditions deal with diversity.

Finally, there is the hermeneutics of oneself as the interpreting subject. Here, student teachers (and pupils) discover how their own lenses and interpretation schemas, through which they look at reality, determine what they appreciate or reject. It is the task of teacher education and teacher coach to create contexts in which teachers (in training) can come to such an insight in oneself and thus to become better guides for their pupils in their own ideological growth and willingness to engage in dialogue.

## 12 A triple didactic movement: diversity, tradition, identity

How do we translate this approach didactically in the classroom (in terms of student learning)? In the field of religion and philosophy of life, the pupil must first become aware of philosophical diversity as it is found in the world today. The teacher offers a multitude of hermeneutical perspectives on reality. The pupil discovers that one's own perspective is not the only possible view on reality. The teacher also trains the pupil to look at reality with different eyes so that they also become aware of their own, personal situation. Next, the teacher focuses on a deeper examination of one's own hermeneutical perspective. If we are dealing with a confessional course, for example, Roman-Catholic or Protestant religion, then pupils are confronted with the philosophical insider perspective of this religion. That is the privileged perspective, and, as such, it is important that the RE teacher situates himself or herself in that hermeneutical perspective and is able to speak and act from this perspective (see below). Finally, in the dynamic between the philosophical multiplicity and the confessional preference perspective, the pupil is invited to make a choice towards deepening one's own philosophical or religious perspective towards entering into dialogue with others about it (Dillen 2015).

### 13 Hermeneutical intersections

In a pluralistic classroom group, religious learning is, in many cases, anything but a sweet, romantic, or harmonising venture. In the process, the religion teacher will encounter so-called 'hermeneutical intersections' that could be present in a class group or between the teacher and the class group (Thomas 2016). These intersections are tensions and conflicting interpretations of reality that could exist in the classroom and refer to a plurality of presuppositions in the class discourse around a certain subject. In hermeneutical learning, these conflicting lines of interpretation on a particular subject are the driving forces behind a clarification process concerning the present reality and the developing philosophical presuppositions among the pupils (Lombaerts 2000; Körtner 2002). In this process, the religion teacher includes the interpretative orientation of the preferred confessional perspective of religious education. In this dynamic, the pupil is invited to discover, express, deepen, broaden, or question one's own understanding of reality. In this process, the learner's experience is not excluded; on the contrary, the teacher demonstrates that there is no such thing as 'the' experience and 'the' tradition, but that the relationship between interpreted experiences and interpreted traditions is much more complex and rich and thereby invites each learner to find his or her own unique identity or to rediscover it in a revitalised way. In this sense, hermeneutical learning is not directed against the use of experience in religious education, but against a monocorrelation of it with 'the' religious tradition (Thomas 2012). In this process, the student enters a rich hermeneutical field of 'multicorrelation' between experience(s) and tradition(s). In other words, there is not less attention to experience, but more.

### 14 Interpreting; not putting things into perspective

A concern sometimes expressed with regard to hermeneutical learning in religion is that one can be led to relativism through the 'game' of interpretations that one comes to know and use: that is, that everyone simply chooses their own mediations of human experience as one wishes. In doing so, their own compositions are no longer faithful to the coherent whole, the tradition, which guarantees that God can reveal himself in and through that tradition and its mediations. In Judaism, for example, one can think of the role of certain religious laws, in Catholicism, the functioning of the sacraments, or in Protestantism, the central place that the Bible has in the relationship with God (Gearon 2003). However, hermeneutics is not the same as relativism because a certain number of rules binds the hermeneutic interpretation. One can compare this with the musical performance of a composition. The musician 'interprets' the composition during his performance, but that does not mean that anything is permissible or that every performance is good and authentic. Similarly, one can compare it with a translator: his or her translation is always an 'interpretation' of the original, but that does not mean that all translations are equally good. In the hermeneutical activity, one must also be faithful to the original. Just as the musician needs to be able to read the score well and appreciate the music as music, and just as the translator needs to know the base language well and appreciate its cultural attitudes, the religion teacher, as an accompanist of hermeneutical learning, needs to be well versed in the tradition that is being taught.



In a Catholic teacher-training programme, student teachers can be offered four criteria to distinguish hermeneutical learning from a relativistic presentation of religion: (1) the mediations of the religious tradition are taken seriously in their strength and meaning for their followers (and are not dismissed as 'just' symbols or as 'mere' subjective constructions); (2) the content of the faith is rendered in an authentic, unabridged and unadulterated way (i.e.: Biblically interpreted, against the background of the history of the tradition, with respect for human experience today, taking into account recent scientific insights, in dialogue with the *sensus fidelium* (the faith of the community) and (for Catholics) loyal to the concerns of the magisterium); (3) complexity in matters of faith is not avoided but sought out and experienced; (4) an attitude of epistemological modesty and an assumption of the eschatological reserve are required in any talk of faith: the truth is always greater than anything I can learn about it (Enhancing Catholic School Identity 2018).

## 15 Witness, specialist, and moderator: the WSM-function of the religious educator

Lastly, hermeneutical learning also requires a specific profile of RE teachers (Erkende Instantie Rooms-Katholieke godsdienst 2019). We refer to this as the 'WSM-function' of the RE teacher: he or she must be 'witness' (W), 'specialist' (S) and 'moderator' (M) at the same time. The RE teacher must speak for himself or herself from the hermeneutical perspective of the confessional tradition for which the school stands. In a public school where education is not tied to a single ideological perspective, it is best to do justice to the inherently committed characterisation of ideological education by presenting different ideological perspectives within the school and by giving pupils (and their parents) the choice of what they prefer. From that point, the religion teacher testifies, and this can be done in a personal manner, in accordance with the way in which he or she has appropriated that tradition in alignment with the hermeneutical rules outlined above. He or she must have sufficient knowledge of other religions and philosophies of life, not only from the outside, but also, in a certain sense, he or she must also have been a guest there. Finally, he or she should be able to act as a moderator when hermeneutical intersections occur in the classroom context. This kind of teacher can lead the way in learning students to communicate themselves concerning religion and philosophy, doing justice to different hermeneutical perspectives in the classroom, and guiding pupils in the formation of their own philosophical growth.

## 16 Challenges and vulnerabilities

What are the risks and weaknesses of such a hermeneutical approach of RE? Negatively, the risk is the (inherent) imbalance between the three perspectives at work: the plural context, the richness of the Catholic tradition, and the identity of the student. If the plural context becomes too dominant, it will damage the particular confessional dimension of RE, ending in multireligious learning, and its risks of subjectivism and relativism. If the Catholic tradition becomes too dominant, RE is changed into catechesis, ending in monoreligious learning, and its risk of not taking the identity of all students seriously. If the identity formation of the students becomes too dominant, RE is reduced to a course on the

philosophy of life, and its risks of anthropocentrism and horizontalization. The history of religious education, both locally and globally, is mostly a continuous shift and a balancing between these three perspectives. Put positively, the challenge is the integration of context, tradition, and identity formation in the learning process of RE. The realisation of the integration of the three perspectives much depends on the theological, pedagogical, and human qualities of the teacher. The model is as strong (or weak) as the teachers that incarnate it, and teacher training centres that can form such teachers in terms of knowledge in theology and religious studies, pedagogy, and spirituality.

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