

# Journal of Religious Education

VOLUME 56(1) 2008

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**JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

*Incorporating*

*WORD IN LIFE (1978-1998)*

*OUR APOSTOLATE (1952-1977)*

Published by the School of Religious Education

**Australian Catholic University**

## **Difference Matters A Hermeneutic-Communicative Concept of Didactics of Religion in a European Multi-Religious Context**

### **The evolution of religious pedagogics in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe**

#### **A pendulum motion**

The understanding of 'Tradition' has played an important role in Catholic religious pedagogics since early times. Its meaning and content have undergone several evolutions however, in the future it will have to continue being rethought (Wiederkehr, 1991). We will set out to analyse the different ways in which religious Tradition were perceived within the visions of Catholic religious education in the last decades and at the same time formulate our own vision of how religious education should interact with 'Tradition' in the future. Our area of emphasis will be the education of the Roman Catholic faith in (higher) secondary schools.

How Tradition in religious education takes shape is closely connected with, among other things, developments regarding the object of religious education, didactics, theology, socio-economic context, and the manner in which the subject, 'religion', is identified in schools (Feifel & Kasper, 1987). Religious education has undergone quite a number of developments in this area during the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We present a survey of the trends in Catholic religious pedagogics in Europe since the 1960s.

The Italian religious educationalist Flavio Pajer views the recent history of religious pedagogics as a pendulum motion between the three poles of education namely, 'object', 'subject' and institution, or religion, student

and school respectively (Pajer, 1993, pp. 31-57). If 'Tradition' is taken to mean an historically developed and clearly defined set of beliefs, then we can reasonably consider 'Tradition' and 'religion' as synonyms for the first pole of Pajer's analysis. We will however demonstrate that depending on which phase of the pendulum swing in religious pedagogics it finds itself in, 'Tradition' can also assume another interpretation and meaning. At the end of this contribution we will examine the need for a new outlook on 'Tradition' for the future of religious pedagogics (Haers, 1999).

There has been a noticeable evolution in religious pedagogics: in terms of its object – religion, 'Tradition' and faith content; with respect to the subject – the student; and, in relation to the institution – the school context. In the 80's the pendulum swung in the direction of the objective pole. During the 90's we discern a return to an evolution in terms of the subject. The direction in which the pendulum will swing in the future is hardly certain. We would however like to put forward what, from our viewpoint, could be a desirable development.

The following table presents an overview of the major developments in Catholic religious pedagogics and didactics during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

***THERE HAS BEEN A NOTICEABLE EVOLUTION IN RELIGIOUS  
PEDAGOGICS: IN TERMS OF ITS OBJECT – RELIGION, 'TRADITION'  
AND FAITH CONTENT; WITH RESPECT TO THE SUBJECT – THE  
STUDENT; AND, IN RELATION TO THE INSTITUTION – THE SCHOOL  
CONTEXT.***

	<i>Object (Religion)</i>	<i>Subject (Student)</i>	<i>Institution (School)</i>
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General description	<b>(1) School catechesis</b>	<b>(2) Antropological experience didactics</b>	<b>(3) School subject</b>
Period	1950-60	End 60's - 80's	Mid 70's - 80's
Tradition	Ontological truth, fixed set of doctrinal truths, the Catholic doctrines	Correlative Tradition approach, greater attention towards biblical stories and human experience	Objective, neutral presentation of religion and Tradition (Christianity)
Didactics and position of the teacher	Deductive, teacher as witness, in service of the Church	Inductive, classroom as lab, hermeneutics of experience, teacher as animator	Religious education in service of individual (school) formation, teacher as specialist
Church and society	Cultural Christianity, great role of Church, Catholic schools: homogeneous group of believers	Protest movements (May '68), Vatican II, secularisation	Secularisation, emphasis upon didactics and pedagogic expertise

Description	<b>(4) Study of religions</b>	<b>(5) The search for meaning</b>	
Period	End '80s - '90s	'90s	
Tradition	Multireligious approach, objective presentation of Traditions	Ethics, fundamental life option (life philosophy), supplier of meaning	
Didactics and position of the teacher	Teacher as specialist	Teacher as moderator	
Church and society	Pluralisation	Pluralisation, bricolage, new openness towards 'fundamental life options' ('life philosophies')	

Description	<b>(6) Hermeneutical-communicative model</b>
Period	Today, start of the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century
Tradition	Open, containing multiple meanings, internally and externally plural, conflicting interpretations (disharmony), interreligious dialogue, personally challenging, utopian truth concept, beyond relativism and fundamentalism
Didactics and position of the teacher	WSM-function (witness, specialist, moderator) of the teacher, personal involvement and a critical disposition on the part of both teacher and student
Church and society	Postmodernism

### School catechesis: ontologisation of Tradition

Throughout the post-war period up to the 1960s religious education was characterised by a stress upon doctrine and dogma. Religious education was defined in terms of Church and belief: religious education in school was a form of Church catechesis. The school lent its infrastructure but in fact had little to say in terms of religious education (Pajer, 1993, p. 34).

The content of religious education was well and clearly defined. It was *the* Catholic teaching that was being taught. This was coupled with an extremely deductive approach, a top-down model in which the teacher, servant of the Church, imparted the Catholic faith to students. The teacher in this instance was primarily an instructor engaged in transmitting the faith. He or she fulfilled the role of believing witness to a monoreligious and monolithic Tradition.

In this framework, Tradition refers to a fixed set of doctrinal truths, dogmas, rituals and ethical convictions which were handed down as *the* Catholic teaching.

There was little room here for questioning, change, difference or (subjective) interpretation of Tradition. It was concerned with 'ontological truth', credal statements that expressed the nature of religious reality. Such an approach to religious education as 'school catechesis' and 'instruction in the Tradition' was possible during this period because of the prevailing cultural climate. There was not yet talk of secularisation: cultural Christianity was at its zenith, and the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II was brewing but had still to take place. The students formed an almost homogeneous group of Catholic practising believers. The lessons, thus, also took for granted the believing status of the students being taught (Pajer, 1993, p. 35).

### Antropological experience didactics and correlative Tradition approach

At the end of the sixties groundbreaking evolutions had taken place both within the Church (Vatican II) and society (May '68). In theology and religious pedagogics

we find an 'antropological turn'. Human experience, the social sciences and the 'signs of the times' (Fossion, 1990, pp. 100-116) received more and more attention. This had important consequences for both religious pedagogics and the interpretation of 'Tradition'. It was not so much the objective Catholic teaching but rather the subjective experience of the human person, in this case the pupils, that now took central place. Religious education was presented in terms of the interests of the students and not so much of the Church as in the previous approach. At a time when Church and Tradition were coming under increasing pressure it was necessary to search for a justification of religious education in schools that was in keeping with the prevailing pedagogical views. Religious education in schools was maintained because it contributed to the personal development of the students themselves. It was no longer frameworked primarily within the kerygmatic mission of the Church but rather fitted in with its diaconal function, namely, service to the students. This implied that it was no longer exclusively Tradition that enjoyed the spotlight but it had to contend with the social environment and lifeworld of young people as well. Pajer speaks of the 'hermeneutics of experience', or 'unraveling', 'interpreting', 'discussing' human experiences, in the light of and in correlation with the Christian Tradition. Religious education was characterised by an inductive approach. In this the teacher carried out the task of animator and in a certain sense the class assumed the character of a discussion group (Pajer, 1993, p. 35).

Within the subject of 'religion' this experience was then linked up with the Christian Tradition. In this framework one speaks of 'correlation didactics' (Baudler, 2002, pp. 446-450). Generally speaking this entailed proceeding from a general human experience that consequently arrived at the Christian Tradition. A lesson would begin with a reading of a secular text or dealt with students' experiences, for instance, connected to the theme of 'listening'. Following this, they would read a biblical text which treated the same theme, e.g. the call of Samuel (Bulckens, 1994, pp. 186-187). It is striking that during this phase biblical texts enjoyed greater use. Tradition no longer received primacy of place in the interpretation of a 'systematic set of beliefs' or 'doctrines'. The biblical Tradition stood central and with this there also came more room for the interpretation of Tradition from the vantage point of experience.

The attempt to seek a relatedness between 'experience' and '(biblical) Tradition' out of this correlation theory sometimes led to a somewhat forced approach in which the distinctness of human experience as much as that of (biblical) Tradition were reduced in terms of the (presupposed) similarities to be found between the two. This approach was aimed at harmony, not at difference. In particular, it wanted to prove that the religious Tradition was capable of answering existential 'human' questions.

#### **Religious education as school subject**

From the mid-seventies onwards through to the eighties religious pedagogics proceeded strongly along the lines of general didactics and religious education was primarily formulated in terms of the school domain. It was thereby not so much a service to the Church or the student but rather a school subject just like any other curriculum contributing to the general formation of students. In terms of objectives, methods and evaluations, religious education increasingly resembled other curricula. The distinction between (school) religious education and (Church) catechesis was now clearly emphasised (Warren, 2001, 125-144). Secularisation and deTraditionalisation in society played a large role in this evolution. The teacher could no longer presume that the students were 'believers'. The subject of 'religion' could no longer be aimed at deepening the faith as had been the case in previous approaches. Religious education was now important because of its cultural function, learning to understand the references to religion in socio-cultural life (art, feastdays, history, etc.). In this way religious education contributed to the cultural formation of the students.

The teacher was seen foremost as an expert who provided objective information about the Christian Tradition. It was not desirable that the teacher's own religious or ideological convictions played a strong role in religious education.

The phenomenon of religion in this environment tended to be approached from a more cultural and objectifying stance. The cultural worth of (one's own) religion had centrestage. The experiential and perceptual component of a religious Tradition no longer played any role in this concept of religious education.

As with the previous two approaches, this approach was still confessionally oriented. It was concerned with the Catholic faith. Different religious perspectives or interpretations did not even come into play. This changed towards the end of the eighties when we start to speak about religious education as religious studies.

#### **Religious education as religious studies**

Pajer sees the pendulum of religious education swing back in the direction of the 'object' – religion itself – at the end of the eighties. The socio-cultural climate no longer allowed for religious education to be considered purely on confessional grounds. The pluralisation of society reflected itself in the student population and Catholic schools were no exception. The classes became heterogeneous: aside from a few staunch Catholic students, most classes consisted of students who either had doubts about their faith or rejected religious belief; often there were some with another religion, in most cases Islam. The personal belief of a number of students also began to incline more towards other religious movements, such as New Age, Wicca, Eastern religions, etc. Religious education could no longer keep pace with this evolution. Whereas in previous phases it had clearly been about *monoreligious* education it was now evolving into *multireligious* education. The subject of 'religion' in schools no longer had to deal with the

Catholic faith only but had to devote attention to other religions as well. This was done in an especially objective and comparative manner. Religious educationalists here speak of '*learning about religion*', in contrast to the monoreligious '*learning in religion*' (Grimmitt, 1994, pp. 133-147).

Religious education had to treat all religions in like manner without allowing for subjective preferences. It was now concerned with a cultural and objective study of religions, the phenomenon of religion being treated from the perspective of the various Traditions. The role of Christian Tradition was relatively small here compared to the previous phases. In its place one could now employ the word 'Tradition' in plural: religious education treated different (religious and non-religious) Traditions. These Traditions, however, were seen as objective entities that could be treated side by side one another in equal ways. The cultural rethinking, reformulation and interpretation of Tradition had not yet been raised. The model of '*learning from religion*' or '*interreligious learning*' was still in the offing (Ziebertz, 1994, pp. 328-337). In this multireligious phase the teacher, just as in previous phases, was generally viewed as a specialist providing clear objective information (Pollefeyt, De Vlieger, & Smit, 2003).

#### **Religious education as search for meaning**

In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century one can distinguish a fifth phase in the evolution of religious pedagogics. The subject once again took centre stage. Religious education was no longer seen as informing about one or more religious Traditions in all their facets. The teacher now approached religious education as a search for meaning. The terms 'fundamental life options' (life philosophies) or 'ethics' were employed in conjunction with, and even in place of, religious education. Sometimes a 'fundamental life options' (life philosophies) curriculum was created in which the confessional dimension disappeared into the background. The specific religious aspect was no longer that important, what mattered was how students could find meaning in a fundamental life option (life philosophy), in a religion, or more accurately: in fragments thereof and in the combination of different elements. The teacher here fulfilled the task of moderator. He or she had to ensure that the various fundamental life options (life philosophies) were adequately presented and allowed sufficient opportunities towards deepening. In all this, the teacher's own convictions played a lesser role.

On the societal level there had slowly come about in the nineties a renewed openness towards the phenomenon of 'fundamental life options' (life philosophies). Less attention was paid to the specifically religious or institutional trappings of a Church or systematic Tradition; society was more concerned with one's personal vision and attitude to life. In a period when grand narratives were crumbling (postmodernism), people had to rely first and foremost on themselves in searching for fundamental life options (life philosophies). Subjective interpretations formed the

kernel of the 'search for meaning'. Religious education thus reflected in a certain way the 'bricolage' culture.

In such a scenario of dealing with fundamental life options (life philosophies) and religion what mattered most was that each one felt good about their individual choice and, indeed, had the possibility of coming to such a choice; yet only the individual decided what exactly that choice should be. Herein lies an important difference from 'experience didactics' where the framework in which the subjective experience was interpreted was clearly described and specified in advance. Experience and Tradition were strongly geared towards each other within correlation didactics and the possibilities of interpretation were (more) restrictive. It was also still concerned with the 'better understanding and more conscious practice of the Catholic faith'. Once religious education became a 'search for meaning', however, the freedom and multiplicity of interpretations became greater. The reasons for entering into conversation with a person who had another viewpoint ceased to matter since now the point of departure was that fundamental life options (life philosophies) were primarily a private choice, which at the same time should and could not be criticised by others. At this juncture, a warning of the 'danger' of relativism and possibly even indifference is fitting. The freedom of 'religion as search for meaning' also presents a challenge to formulate a new model of religious education, one that avoids the danger of relativism but that is, also, not characterised by objectivism, be it the neutrality or dogmatism of the earlier phases. In the following we will unfold such an approach as the 'hermeneutical-communicative model of religious education'.

#### **Some critical remarks**

Two comments need to be made concerning the above mentioned evolutions. First, we must remark that even today elements from the different historical trends still play a role in religious education. Correlation theory, the objective approach to religion [as study object], the multireligious approach, and religion as search for meaning do not mutually exclude one another and in fact operate with a certain complementarity in the actual approach of religious education today. We can perhaps speak here of a certain 'non-simultaneous simultaneity'.

The correlation model, however, can be considered as the dominant model of religious education in preceding decades. This model continued to be further developed and elaborated upon. Even today one still speaks much about correlation didactics albeit in a more nuanced and complex form than the correlation didactics of the seventies. A new model, however, presents itself at this moment in time. We will elaborate upon the 'hermeneutical-communicative model' that we would like to advocate as the new model for religious education in the coming future (Maex, 2003, pp. 67-80).

A second comment concerns the role of the teacher in the evolution of religious pedagogics. With the description of the evolutions in religious pedagogics in



terms of the three poles of religion, student and school, we must be careful not to underestimate the role of the teacher. The determinants of religious pedagogics are not limited to merely these three poles. Will not religious education become still more specific in the future through the position that the teacher takes, and shall not a greater responsibility come to rest with the actual contact of the religious educator with Tradition, with the students and with the subject of 'religion' as school subject? In the hermeneutical-communicative model that we set out below we will expressly address the role of the teacher.

### **Religious pedagogics and Tradition in the future: towards a hermeneutical-communicative vision**

We have so far sketched five evolutions in post-war European religious pedagogics. How religious education will turn out in future we are hard-pressed to say with any certainty. There are however a number of reasons to advocate a hermeneutical-communicative vision of religious education and Tradition as the model for the future. We will explain this model and the approach to Tradition in the following.

### **Critique upon correlation didactics**

The end of the nineties was characterised by a radicalisation of the awareness of the plurality of religious and/or ideological reality (Ziebertz, 2001, pp. 67-87). Hermeneutics enters into this context as a means to deal theologically (Geffre, 2001) and religio-pedagogically (Lombaerts & Pollefeyt, 2005) with this multiplicity of religious and/or ideological perspectives and Traditions. Whereas from the '70s hermeneutics functioned against the background of correlation didactics in particular, from the '90s it began functioning against the backdrop of pluralistic theology. The significance of this shift is not incidental. It is our contention that a hidden ontological agenda was still at work in original correlation didactics. By this we mean that during the '70s and '80s 'experience' and 'Tradition' tried to connect with each other in such a way that it was via experience that one sought to uncover the true meaning of the Tradition. The reverse was also assumed: that via Tradition the deeper, true significance of experience could be brought to light.

The underlying idea here is that Tradition and experience not only point to one another but also share a deepest connection. That such a positive attitude towards correlation didactics was possible owed itself to the fact that the Christian Tradition still formed the underlying, albeit slowly eroding, general cultural-historical background to western culture and hence Roman Catholic religious education. Thus, at that time the correlation still succeeded to a considerable degree even though its success was gradually decreasing. This was not so much because the ontological presupposition was correct in assuming that experience and Tradition were geared towards each other intrinsically and, if correctly understood, referred almost exclusively to one another (*Topf-Deckel Korrelationsdidaktik*) (Grümme, 2002, p. 22), but rather that the generally accepted Christian background of culture and society was still

implicitly and far-reaching in evidence. However, the more society pluralized and 'difference' entered and challenged Christian culture, the more one had to conclude that correlation didactics no longer worked (Englert, 1993, pp. 97-110).

Religious educators gradually came to realise that correlation didactics, although a hard-fought asset of religious pedagogics against doctrinal catechetics, was no longer working (Hilger & Kropac, 2002, p. 62). In other words, one discovered that anthropology no longer guaranteed an automatic shortcut to theology and that a proper experiential analysis of reality no longer led to the automatic acknowledgement of the relevance, and consequent existential and believing endorsement, of the Christian Tradition. How much one started off with young people and children from their own experience, and how great their initial enthusiasm, many still began to pull out once the interpretation of the (Christian) Tradition was coupled to the analysis of experience.

What is more, this correlation strategy even proved itself counter-productive in the long run. Students were aware of the hidden ontological agenda of the religious educator who was working with this correlative methodology. Accordingly, the students were extremely allergic to the exclusive interpretive coupling of human experience with the Christian Tradition to which it is repeatedly linked. Also, from a theological perspective, this kind of 'mono-correlation' was problematic. It reduced the Christian Tradition to what was understandable from the perspective of general human experience. Not only was the complexity of human experience not recognised, but also the specificity, the alterity, the exteriority and multidimensionality of the Christian Tradition self was underestimated.

Another religious pedagogical approach therefore came upon the scene. This approach is still correlative but is particularly characterised by correlative plurality and a more modest correlative didactics. This new, multi-correlational approach is not criticizing correlation as such, but a certain didactical use of correlation theology (Pollefeyt, 2005). Correlation as a theological principle still remains important in the new approach but no longer determines everything, certainly not in religious didactic practice. At the basis of the new hermeneutical model of religious pedagogics lies a optimistic anthropological departure point, characteristic of Catholic religious pedagogics, that the human being is essentially a hermeneutical being. Or, put differently, the notion that everyone's nature, is in principle, receptive to Tradition as an accessible and communicable reality still remains important for the future of Catholic religious pedagogics. However, one now realises, more so than previously, that human experience is a multifaceted interpretable reality, which although it *can* be correlated with the Christian Tradition does not automatically and exclusively needs to be. In other words, the ontological premise behind the old correlation didactics is hereby abandoned. In this way the link between 'experience' and 'Tradition' is, as it were, made looser yet not cut loose altogether.

The concept of Tradition also functions differently in this context. 'Tradition' itself becomes a much more internally and externally plural notion. It is now acknowledged, both inside and outside the Christian Tradition, that there are many Traditions, be it large or small, that all have something to say on human experience. A hermeneutical religious pedagogics will therefore seek to draw up and support processes and methods that stimulate the multiplicity of possible correlations between human experience and religious/ideological Traditions to help serving the identity formation of the learning subject, the class group, the school, the Church and/or society.

### **Hermeneutical intersections**

The points of departure for the above mentioned approach are the so-called hermeneutical intersections (Lombaerts, 2000, pp. 2-7). One no longer starts with the Christian Tradition as such but instead with classroom tensions and their conflicting interpretations of reality that in turn refer back to a plurality of presuppositions underlying the class discussion of a certain subject. These lines of conflicting interpretation on a certain subject spark an illumination into the existing different religious or ideological presuppositions existing in the class room. These hermeneutical intersections are intrinsically linked to a certain religious or ideological issue. They surface in a class group where different interpretations on a certain topic or issue exist (whether between teacher and student(s) or among students themselves). They refer back to a multiplicity of experiences, contexts, narratives, Traditions, etc. to which students and teachers are often invisibly loyal (Dillen, 2000, pp. 262-265). In this model of faith communication the hermeneutical intersections are traced, laid bare and unravelled in a communicative process in the class room. This interpretive way of teaching and learning is the result of a confrontation with influxes from various sources, namely the prevailing culture, one's own life story, and the existing narrative religious/ideological Traditions ([www.godsdiensonderwijs.be](http://www.godsdiensonderwijs.be)).

The purpose of such a form of hermeneutical religious education is to allow students to discover their own and others' religious/ideological presuppositions and to reinforce such awareness. In this way students can become receptive to the wonderment and multifaceted interpretable character of reality. As a result, they obtain building blocks hewn from a multiplicity of religious or ideological Traditions and the particular perspectives of meaning connected thereto. They learn to deal with the freedom of choice generated by this plural supply of meaning. Some religious/ideological perspectives and Traditions need to be deconstructed, yet there must also be room for the (re)construction of one's life story with the newly added building materials from Traditions and experiences. Ultimately, students must be able to communicate their choices to themselves and to others in words, deeds, signs and symbols.

In this way religious education helps to serve the formation of the students on a cognitive and affective level and as such can also fall under the school's domain because through such a religious education the school provides young people the space to become full and engaged human beings. Certainly for Catholic schools this reaches back to impact upon one's own identity, in which the diaconal mission, plays a very important role. As can be expected, historical developments in religious pedagogics have shown that there is little room nowadays for a (compulsory) religious education approached kerygmatically and exclusively in terms of Church and Catholic faith (which does not mean that *kērūgma* is not an important dimension in pastoral work at school).

### **The religious educator as hermeneut: witness, specialist and moderator**

The advantage of such a hermeneutical religious pedagogics is that difference is taken seriously. The diversity of opinions, attitudes, Traditions, etc. is not dismissed but on the contrary is made explicit. As with correlation didactics the point of departure is human experience and the actual events surrounding children and young people's lives. For religious educators it can signify a real liberation when they have not always automatically and exclusively to correlate human experience with Christian Tradition *per se*. The hermeneutic approach leaves more room for diversity, and also conflict, than in the anthropological turn previously. In a certain sense, it also becomes easier to bring the Christian perspective into the religious education class, but in a non-ontological correlative style. A concrete example of this would be that religious educators need no longer say, 'Christ is the Son of God analogous to the relation of a student to his/her father' but instead, '*Christians believe that Christ is God's Son, analogous to the way in which Christians experience their relation to their fathers/mothers.*'

This does not mean that we have once again ended up in the neutral and multireligious model. Our model involves more than just the objective reproduction of the fundamental life options of a certain group of people – i.e. believers. The student is invited to take her/his own position. The different Traditions of fundamental life options are not simply placed indifferently next to each other but instead are now treated from a dialogical perspective. Involvement is the key. One can also speak here of interreligious learning (*learning from religion*). From the teacher's perspective this means that it is still possible and even preferable, that the teacher identifies her/himself with a particular religious/ideological perspective and Tradition. In this model students can expect that the religious educator has constructed his/her own religious or ideological identity in critical and creative dialogue with religious and ideological Traditions. Fundamental life options and religion are here seen as engaged attitudes that are likewise best communicated in an engaged manner. For a teacher on 'Roman Catholic faith' the faith synthesis is primarily made in dialogue with the Catholic Tradition. This means that the Christian Tradition is '*confessionally*

*constitutive* for the religious educator's own identity (Pollefeyt, 1997, pp. 10-37). In other words, the religious educator is someone who can and must bear witness to the Traditions to which s/he has derived her/his own religious/ideological identity. But at the same time the religious educator is also a moderator. S/he realises that her/his confessionally constitutive identity is not the only meaningful correlation that can be developed from human experience and that human experience itself is a multi-interpretable reality. S/he accepts and confirms that also other valuable representations exist of the human search for meaning in life. And s/he is ready to moderate and steer students along the process of complex and multifaceted correlations that they develop between their own experiences and religious and non-religious Traditions. In other words, the teacher has a confessional but not ontologically constitutive identity. S/he knows, accepts, and is positively open towards other religious or ideological identities developing from the same group of experiences.

That does not mean that in such a model (moral and existential) truth is no longer of any account and that everyone can arbitrarily construct their own moral, religious or ideological identity without being accountable to one's reason, Traditions and human experience. The religious educator is also an authority in this model, an expert, a specialist who provides a properly documented and scientifically and morally solid background to the various life philosophies and religions. In this way s/he can also critically evaluate and/or deconstruct certain aspects of the religious/ideological Traditions, both within and without Christianity.

The threefold function of religious educator as witness, specialist and moderator forms the kernel of the profile for the religious educator in the hermeneutical-communicative model (Erkende Instantie, 1999, p. 39). In this perspective the hermeneutical religious educator is someone who is at the same time rooted in his/her own Tradition yet open towards other religious or ideological Traditions and young people's search for their own identity.

#### **A utopian truth concept**

The truth concept that a hermeneutical religious educator employs is open and plural, beyond both ontology and relativism. In the hermeneutical-communicative model truth presents itself in terms of plurality and always against an eschatological background. In other words, truth in a hermeneutical-communicative model lies in the future. It is a *u-topia* in the double sense of the word (Cornu & Pollefeyt, 2003, pp. 45-65; 56-58). On the one hand it is an unreachable place (*u-topos*), i.e. a reality that no one possesses totally, on the other hand it is also a good place (*eu-topos*), which means that it is still the orientation of religious pedagogical activity. From this perspective, all religions are aimed at truth, but no religion posits the full truth. The question is not if all religions are equally truth, but how we should deal with religions that are all

confronted with not possessing the full truth. For the teacher, this means that he or she takes the students on a communal search for truth, goodness and beauty but the ultimate finality of that search lies in the future, hidden behind the horizon of all religions and world view. With this must also be said that truth cannot simply be found in the mere appropriation of Traditions from the past or that today no one can make this truth their own. Instead, Traditions supply instruments and building blocks to either break open certain religious/ideological constructions or direct students towards new religious/ideological syntheses that bode promise, individually and communally. In this way experiences, bible passages, Traditions, community narratives, theologies and magisterium can be brought together in a non-ontological, or better, multi-correlative way, so that in a non-coercive but inviting manner they can offer real support to the students drafting their own religious or ideological biography. In the following we will show how the Tradition itself receives and develops a promising future.

#### **Religious didactical consequences**

The consequences for religious interaction from a didactical point of view in a hermeneutical-communicative understanding of religious pedagogics are not minor. The Christian Tradition is neither the starting nor the end point of such an approach. Instead, one begins by taking seriously the initial situation of the students, not just the individual biography of the student but the society and class as well. This does not mean joining in trends or being carried away by the currents of the day. Rather, it involves being continually bent on a sort of in-depth reading of reality, being attentive to the surrounding reality wherein religious or ideological questions, challenges and perceptions present themselves and are found. Once students are made religiously or ideologically aware of the questions and different interpretations that evoke their initial situation and response, openness is created to illuminate and interpret these experiences of reality from different religious and/or ideological frameworks. At this point it is important not to introduce the Christian Tradition monolithically or mono-correlatively. On the contrary, we wish to plead for a sort of non-correlative phasing within the didactical interaction of the religious education classes. Specifically, this means that every time the temptation occurs to correlate 'experience' and 'Tradition', the teacher consciously chooses not to succumb to it. S/he will then allow new questions to arise from experience and/or Tradition that once again challenge the (nearly) given correlative answer, this from the belief in a truth that is always greater than the human answers we try to construe.

#### **An open Tradition concept with multiple meanings**

A hermeneutical-communicative religious pedagogics thus treats the Christian Tradition in a very specific manner. On the one hand, the Christian Tradition is seen as an internally pluralistic and particular Tradition that cannot be reduced to merely one uniform message; still less so be communicated or translated into universal categories (such that everyone would have to concur



with it). On the other hand, neither is the Christian Tradition viewed as so deeply engaged in its own particularity that a conversation with the world and the creation of links with present-day reality has become impossible. On the contrary, it is precisely the recognition of the plural and particular character of the Christian Tradition that makes it possible to indicate particular human experiences as containing multiple meanings and to, in turn, recognise them in their particularity.

At the same time, a hermeneutical-communicative religious pedagogics approaches the Christian Tradition as an open Tradition, i.e. not as a Tradition that has been, once and for all, sealed off but one in which one actively participates and learns to write out oneself. What is more, it is precisely through the confrontation of manifold meanings and creative hermeneutics with this Tradition that 'revelation' can occur today, increasing the Tradition's ambit and making ready for the future of human being and world. This also means that all interpretations brought into this communication process which threaten the future of humans and world can and must be questioned.

### Conclusion

How can religious education prepare pupils for a culturally and religiously diverse society and still hold on to its denominational (especially Christian) identity? In the hermeneutic-communicative model of religious education, difference itself becomes the matter, not just because of external circumstances, such as a growing multicultural and multi-religious context, but in the name of the identity of Christian education itself. In this approach, the tension between difference and identity is made the locus of religious education. Standing in this tension is preparing the next generations for life and is also the place where - in the Jewish and Christian Tradition - God reveals himself. Teacher-training should first and foremost prepare future teachers to deal with this tension and to mobilize it as the engine of the communicative religious learning process (Pollefeyt et al., 2004). The class of religion then becomes the place of exercise for dealing with difference and for learning to respect and to integrate in a dialogical and communicative way different perspectives into the development of one's own life story and world view.

The confessional character of Christian schools and of the courses in Christian religious education understand themselves here to a service (*diakonia*) to children and young people to assist them into the discovery of the meaning of life in the name of a truth that is greater than the easily assumed truths of the world. Therefore, an option is made for a model aimed at existential and religious growth rather than an educational learning

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process aimed at initiation into the Tradition as such. The starting and end point of religious education for students is that they learn to take a personal critical and well-informed position so as to arrive at one's own well-considered conclusion with respect to belief and learning. It is in this process that the Christian Tradition is brought into play - incarnated by a believing teacher with his own engaged faith synthesis - so that the students' own development of convictions can be confronted with the interpretation of meaning according to the faith Tradition. Involvement implies that one does not treat one's own Christian Tradition as a museum piece. On the contrary, it is something that must be learnt, discussed and recontextualised in a living manner and which can arouse experiences and questions. Tradition in this sense can be described as the 'impacting of life' (Erkende Instantie, 1999, p. 159). It is better to speak of 'Traditions' in the plural referring equally to the internal pluralism within the Christian Tradition as to the other religious and ideological Traditions. Yet despite the existence of a plurality of Traditions in Christian religious education there is still an expressed preferential option for the Christian Tradition as a 'proven Tradition' that must be explicitly and consciously fostered. The Christian Tradition cannot be described in terms of truth but rather religious/ideological 'plausibility'. Situating the Christian faith Tradition(s) within a wider supply of other religions and fundamental life options is not only seen as a chance to bring greater awareness of religious issues or stimulate interreligious dialogue, but also as a way to better arrive at Christianity's identity and to anchor Christians more deeply in their own Tradition and community. It is precisely by situating the Christian narrative within a multiplicity of religions and fundamental life options that one can bring the awareness and importance of the particular Christian Tradition to life.

In religious education of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the class room is characterised by plurality, openness and a multiplicity of meanings. Today's Catholic religious pedagogics retains both a commitment to the Christian Tradition(s) as well as a readiness to explore things further, to question and even, where necessary, to renew in view of one's own religious life, be it the religious educator or the students. With this development, the evolution process of the previous decades is set forward and the present challenges of pluralism and postmodernity are taken seriously, enriching the Christian Tradition itself.

[Translation from Dutch to English by Emmanuel Nathan]

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