



The Religious Education Teacher as a Guide in Fostering Identity, Celebrating Diversity and Building Community*

O professor do Ensino Religioso como guia no fomento da Identidade, da celebração da Diversidade e da construção da comunidade

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Abstract: This contribution is situated in the European discourse on the role of the teacher of religious/worldview education in schools. Based on the assumption that every child and youngster has the right to deal with existential questions in a safe and solid learning environment, the author focuses on the specific role of the teacher to enhance religious/worldview competence and identity development in the students. Within the idea of professionalism three roles can be discerned: the teacher as a guide in fostering identity, celebrating diversity and building community. These professional roles have a counterpart in the spiritual disposition of the teacher. This argument is developed through a specific reading of the medieval German mystical theologian Meister Eckhart. Surprising thoughts on who the teacher is and what he should do (and eventually not do) are evoked and discussed.

Keywords: religious education, interreligious learning, teacher education, professional spirituality, Meister Eckhart.

Resumo: Esta contribuição está situada no discurso europeu sobre o papel do professor de Ensino Religioso/ Visão Global nas escolas. Partindo do pressuposto de que toda criança e jovem tem o direito de lidar com questões existenciais em um ambiente de aprendizagem seguro e sólido, o autor enfoca o papel específico do professor para melhorar a competência religiosa/ visão de mundo e desenvolvimento de identidade nos estudantes. Dentro da ideia de profissionalismo, três funções podem ser discernidas: o professor como um guia na promoção da identidade, na celebração da diversidade e na construção da comunidade. Estes papéis profissionais têm uma contrapartida na disposição espiritual do professor. Esse argumento é desenvolvido através de uma leitura específica do teólogo medieval místico alemão Meister Eckhart. Pensamentos surpreendentes, em que são evocados e discutidos o que professor é e o que deve fazer (e, eventualmente, não fazer).

Palavras-chave: educação religiosa, de aprendizagem inter-religiosa, formação de professores, espiritualidade profissional, Meister Eckhart.

* This article is part of a larger research project with the same name instigated by the author. The project involves researchers from Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Germany, South-Africa, Spain and the United States of America. The topic of the "RE teacher" will also be central to the 2016 convention of the "Religious Education Association" in Pittsburgh (PA), see www.religiouseducation.net.

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Introduction

In many countries in the world schools are dealing with religion and worldview as a multilayered phenomenon in society. They argue that children and young people need to be aware of the role, impact and diversity of this phenomenon, so that they will be able as future citizens to deal peacefully and resiliently with their own and each other's religion and worldview. In Europe this concern can be found in many countries and differs in relationship to the local context and history of the topic within the school system. In some countries like Slovenia and Portugal religious education (RE) is considered to fulfill a religious initiation or catechetical role at school (*mono-religious*). In other countries such as Norway and the United Kingdom RE is considered to be a multi-faith presentation for all students sitting together in one classroom (*multi-religious*). And still in other countries such as the Netherlands and Germany the confessional divisions between religions and worldviews are officially respected (e.g. in North-Rhine-Westphalia in Germany RE provisions are available separately for Catholic, Protestant and Muslim children), but actually children and young people need to deal as well with the "strange" position of fellows in the classroom, of their own background and of other cultural backgrounds (*inter-religious*). In some countries such as Albania and France no religion or worldview is officially allowed to enter the school gate. No articulation of the phenomenon within the lives and living contexts of youngsters officially take place. The scholarly reflection and research on these developments is massive.¹

On the *grass roots* things are moving in Europe as well: there is almost no local school these days that isn't struggling with the issue of the position of RE in the community. There is almost no RE handbook these days that isn't dealing with the question of the legitimate position of RE in a pluralized society. And there is almost no teacher education department these days that isn't discussing the role of the RE teacher within these global and local concerns. In this contribution, based on my teaching and research in the Catholic RE department of Dortmund University the discourse on the role of the RE teacher in Europe will be documented and reflected, in three steps. At first the professional role of the teacher as a guide in the learning process is evoked. Then the complex field of tension between professionalism and spirituality is discussed. And finally these thoughts on the role of the teacher will be critically interrupted and thought out by referring to medieval mysticism.

Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) will be our guide in this educational "spiritual exercise"

The teacher as a professional guide in the religious learning process

The conviction that the teacher fulfills a central role in the web of meaning and encounter in RE is beyond question and has been recently documented for general education by the Australian researcher John Hattie.² One of his central findings is the

¹ Just to mention the most recent overviews in English: M.T. Buchanan & A.-M. Gellel, *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools*; K. Engebretson et. al., *International Handbook for Inter-religious Education*; R. JACKSON et al. *Religion and Education in Europe*; B. ROEBBEN, *Seeking Sense in the City*; M. ROTHGANGEL et. al., *Religious Education at Schools in Europe*.

² J. HATTIE, *Visible Learning*.

need for permanent mutual feedback of the teacher and the learner in the process. They both need each other in understanding the tasks ahead in the complex web of meaning “giving” and meaning “receiving”. In this web the teacher should however be the point of reference, the professional guide, the one who is not anxious to work responsibly within the complex structure of the web.

Nowadays *religious* learning is complex, this is the least one can say. Multi-cultural and multi-religious dynamics play an important role within the larger (social) learning environment and within the personal (psychological) development of the child. To foster personal growth in young people to participate peacefully and constructively in social cohesion is not an easy job. It is hard labor and demands delicacy, patience, resilience and diversity-sensitivity of the teacher. Where “deep plurality” (Robert Heffner) reigns, the teacher needs to be concentrated and flexible at the same time. This is a paradox, by the American philosopher of education David T. Hansen coined as “tenacious humility”: the teacher concentrates on the learner, steps aside himself but needs to offer appropriate content at the same time, so that the learner can flourish.³ Sometimes teachers can be overruled by this issue, argues Hansen. They become paralyzed by the velocity of impulses in the children’s life world or they ignore the situation completely by relying on simplistic solutions. Children need a “cosmopolitan” education: the teacher needs to be present and learn together with them in “reflective openness to the world and reflective loyalty to the local.”⁴ It goes without saying that this old pedagogical challenge is now accelerated by the same *cosmopolis* surrounding us and our children.

Three professional roles can be ascribed to the teacher: on the micro-level of the learner he is fostering identity; on the meso-level of the classroom he is enhancing and celebrating diversity; and on the macro-level of the school he is building community. He accompanies children on the road to self-clarification, he makes the classroom safe for diversity and he contributes as a RE teacher to a “culture of recognition”⁵ at school. In these three tasks the RE teacher can develop his personal and role identity.

How does the pedagogical professionalism of the teacher structurally look like? It can, according to the German researcher Stefan Heil, be characterized by three elements: (1) a case specific *transformation* of (2) a *repertoire* in substance, which then (3) is leading in a specific *relational* context to an appropriate solution.⁶ In other words: the professional teacher knows how to (1) concretely and flexibly (2) hand over and adapt his content in (3) a concrete encounter with a learner or a learning community – and in doing so, reaching a common and new insight. In the case of religious learning the professionalism of the teacher proves itself, when he is able – *for* children, relying on the knowledge *of* children and together *with* children⁷ – to deal with a complex religious phenomenon and to come to new and diversified personal insights. This conscious professional act of the teacher not only improves the learner (*micro*), but also the classroom (*meso*), and hopefully also the entire school (*macro*).

³ D.T. HANSEN, *Exploring the Moral Heart of Teaching*, pp.157-191.

⁴ D.T. HANSEN, *Dewey and Cosmopolitanism*, p.137.

⁵ M. JÄGGLE et. al., *Kultur der Anerkennung*.

⁶ S. HEIL, *Religionspädagogische Professionalität von Religionslehrerinnen und Religionslehrern*.

⁷ Based on the three dimensions of children’s theology, see B. ROEBBEN, *Seeking Sense in the City*, pp.127-141.

The teacher in the field of tension between professionalism and spirituality

No teacher is acting neutrally. Theoretically one could think about a value and/or worldview neutral position of the teacher, but practically, in front of the classroom, this position would not be manageable. The “heart of teaching” is always “moral”, argues David T. Hansen.⁸ Every teacher brings along his own personality, his own pedagogical code, his own moral sensibility, his own feeling of tradition and his own educational handicraft. The stress has been laid on the word “own”: teachers are not exchangeable, every teacher is different in his own way of dealing with professionalism. The above mentioned “universal” theory of professionalism does not exist in a clinical clean way, but is always executed in a specific ecological way, by the “particular” teaching person at stake. “It is normal to be different”: what counts for learners counts also for their teachers. Nobody is standing in front of a classroom as a *tabula rasa*, every teacher brings along his unicity. In Belgium the educationalist Geert Kelchtermans has been pointing to the importance of the biography in the professional self-assessment of the teacher.⁹ In the Netherlands the educationalist Fred Korthagen uses the image of an onion which can be peeled of to describe how different layers in the professional identity of the teacher can be discerned: from daily acting to insights, personal experiences, foundational values and norms and finally to some form of spiritual identity.¹⁰ How the teacher deals in the classroom with a religious conflict, how he pays attention to the ways in which children and young people grow on a personal, classroom and school level in human dignity, this all has a spiritual “heart”, to use the phrase of Hansen. Who raises high standards with respect to humanization in education cannot remain standing neutrally in front of the learning community.

In this respect I agree with the Belgian moral philosopher Patrick Loobuyck who makes a clear distinction between impartiality and critical distance at the one hand and neutrality at the other hand.¹¹ The teacher must be able to offer objectively the provisionally best knowledge on a specific religious issue (*learning about religion*) and needs to take care that every child is attended when dealing with that knowledge, so that the classroom can become a “shared open space [...] in which a diversity of perspectives and ideas can come to the surface”¹² (*learning from religion*). The teacher is not allowed to be partial, he is not allowed nor to favor neither to neglect people or groups of people, but he needs to take care that every learner is taken seriously. This is not neutrality: the teacher needs to be a reliable “guide leading young people through the religious, moral and philosophical landscape” that surrounds them.¹³ This also means that teachers can show the courage of their convictions in this orientation process. “It goes without saying that teachers are not allowed to force their own worldview upon pupils, but at the other hand they do not need to keep silent stubbornly or to conceal their convictions. [...] There is no teacher without a worldview, so he has to take it for granted, he cannot do otherwise, and sometimes the teacher is even very engaged. It can be possible so, that learners know about the personal journey of their teacher and that

⁸ D.T. HANSEN, *Exploring the Moral Heart of Teaching*.

⁹ G. KELCHTERMANS, *Reflectief ervaringsleren voor leerkrachten*.

¹⁰ F. KORTHAGEN, www.korthagen.nl. (consulted on the June 15, 2015).

¹¹ P. LOOBUYCK, *Meer LEF in het onderwijs*, pp.89-95.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.90.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.92.

the explicit articulation of this journey can enrich the learning process. Teachers need to develop the quality of deliberation, in order to know when and how this articulation can happen in the framework of a professional habitus, based on openness, critical distance and impartiality.”¹⁴

The Dutch secondary school teacher and researcher Bill Banning has ascertained in his recent doctoral dissertation that teachers in general (thus not only RE teachers) are not insensitive for the connection between professional self-assessment and spiritual development.¹⁵ In the respondents’ sample the concept of “vocation” was eminently present. The research was conducted through questionnaires and interviews, diagnosed with linguistic analysis and after interpretation resulting in the occurrence of four thematic clusters: “spiritual association” (SA), “internal ethos” (IE), “relational-pedagogical acting” (RP) and “content related qualification” (KW for the Dutch “kwalificatie”). The cluster SA occurred especially in combination with the clusters IE and RP, much less in combination with the KW. Teachers bared witness to “something higher” (Herman De Dijn), to an “act of faith” (Parker Palmer), to “the moral heart of teaching” (David T. Hansen) – definitions that Banning took from his theoretical research, but to which he came actually across in the biographical-narrative accounts of the teachers – and this especially when they talked about their contact with students (RP) and their motivation (IE) to do the job.¹⁶ “That’s why I like this job”, was then the most frequent phrase. The question can be raised: how can the fourth element (KW) also become relevant in this respect? In other words: how can spirituality also be embedded in the content related qualification of the teacher (in other words: in his subject), in such a way that he is able to show how he is creatively and personally connected to and intrinsically motivated for his subject and encourages students to do the same? In other words, how can the appropriated (in the sense of *proprium*, which belongs to him in a specific way) *repertoire* of the professional teacher (see Stefan Heil above), within the *transformation* and adaptation process to a new *relational* context, also be a sign of a deep spiritual commitment of the teaching professional? Banning is convinced that the logic of institutional churches and faith communities often knocks down the teachers in their spiritual development. In this post-secular era new educational spiritualities need to be developed, in the midst of motivation (IE), relationship (RP) and content (KW). This is precisely why the German religious educationalist Rudolf Englert believes that every teacher education should be eventually an “exercise in (learning to discover one’s own spiritual) disposition” (according to Wolfgang Brezinka’s idea of *Gesinnungsbildung*)¹⁷ – knowledge and wisdom about the field of tension in the classroom and the specific role of the teacher within this. In that fundamental reflection on the teacher’s irreplaceable role the RE teacher education departments could even take the lead, according to Englert.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., p.94.

¹⁵ B.W.J.M. BANNING, *Leraren, wat boeit jullie?*

¹⁶ Ibid., pp.293-295.

¹⁷ R. ENGLERT, *Die Krise pädagogischer Berufe und das Berufsethos des Religionslehrers*, p.58.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.59.

Looking at the RE teacher through the lens of medieval mysticism

The RE teacher who deals in a cramped way with his own professional self-assessment, with his own religious biography, will make young people insecure in their search for identity. A healthy spirituality (SA) will help the teacher to relativize and to let loose, and encourages him to stay in tune with his motivation (IE), his relationships (RP) and his domain specific knowledge (KW). It is undoubtedly a remarkable paradox: being there and being at a distance, being wise and being moderate in wisdom, preparing one's teaching accurately and stepping back during the actual learning process of pupils. The societal implications of this delicate position of the teacher are immense: are young people still being called to realize their vocation? Is there still a call for vocation in our schools and in society, so that vocation can emerge in the hearts of young people? Or to put it differently: are teachers prepared to accept the gift of friendship of young people (who ask for advice, wisdom and orientation) and therefore support them in the development of their responsibility? Teachers only will have relevance in the future when they have learned to listen empathetically and to react responsibly. The educational relationship is deeply connected with this responsibility-within-letting-go and with this letting-go-within-responsibility. In order to understand this paradox, we now turn our attention to the medieval mystical theologian Meister Eckhart, in three steps: his biography, his philosophical and theological vision on education. We conclude the paper with some surprising thoughts on the future of the religious educational professional.

Short biography of Meister Eckhart

Meister Eckhart lived from 1260 until 1328, in an era of important changes in the European intellectual landscape.¹⁹ The rise of cities, the origins of aristocracy and the development of universities gave a new dynamic to the social, cultural and spiritual life of those days. Interesting analyses of the rise of Renaissance in the midst of the so called Dark Ages can be read everywhere and cannot be addressed here. Meister Eckhart fulfills an important role in this interpretive horizon. As a wandering preacher – a member of the Dominican Order, a mendicant order with a strong prophetic voice within church and society in those days – he had a knack of translating theology in vernacular language and bringing it closer to the people. The complex theological treaties of Scholasticism (of for instance his Dominican fellows Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas) received a special splendor in Meister Eckhart's allegoristic interpretations while he was preaching on his many travels. Even more, by applying everyday language in theology, this theology received a human face in Eckhart's work: democratically accessible, spiritually meaningful and existentially recognizable. The down to earth theological "mother tongue" of Eckhart was aiming at articulating the core of faith through narrative-metaphoric expressions – which in those days was mainly expressed through affirmative-dogmatic Latin sentences. It will therefore not surprise the reader that Eckhart's spiritual lay theology became suspected in an early stage and later evolved into an official doctrinal conviction of Meister Eckhart. He should have brought the "simple minds" in entanglement "by just

¹⁹ M. BRAEKERS, *Meister Eckhart*; B. McGinn, *Mystical Language in Meister Eckhart and his Disciples*; D. Mieth, *Meister Eckhart. Gotteserfahrung und Weg in die Welt*; S. WENDEL, *Christliche Mystik. Eine Einführung*.

simply addressing complex theological issues in public.”²⁰ His invitation therefore to his audience was not just to react piously to his words, but to reflect critically and personally alongside of his preaching as “Lebemeister.”²¹

Eckhart’s philosophy of education

Every human being has the task of becoming fully human, according to one’s own talents and insights. This task is an act of personal freedom: nobody can take over this unique existential endeavor. In the deepest sense human flourishing means to be open for the unique experiential world revealed during one’s own journey, by “a desire to be addressed or elevated by someone or something.”²² This experience is different for every human person and demands a specific effort – *eine Sorge*, according to Martin Heidegger – an awareness going in two directions. First of all it means taking care of oneself, remaining open for the unique revelatory dimension of life; and secondly being responsive and responsible, so that this revelation actually can take place within daily life. The human *Dasein* is ex-istential and ex-pecting, radical openness, a vacuum and precisely therefore the place where the specific dynamic of life in the form of a personal story can be/should be found and unfolded.²³

The German word for education, *Bildung* (almost impossible to translate, the closest one can come is “edification”), receives a special meaning in Eckhart’s philosophy of education. This word, which means literally creating an image (*Ein-bildung*) in one’s mind that is congruent to reality and which helps to understand reality better, needs to be dismantled or deconstructed completely, according to Eckhart. Good education can only occur when *Ent-bildung* takes place, when the human person is getting rid of any reminiscence to representations of the world. Only when he has disconnected radically from images and language (*Abgeschiedenheit*) and has become completely receptive for something-coming-from-elsewhere (*Gelassenheit*), only then the real meaning of the world can break through (*Durchbruch*). Only then *Um-bildung* or wisdom can come into existence. Even without the theological connotation this schema is plausible: the deepest core of the human being, the soul, cannot be grasped in education, in what a person has learned or “imagined”. A human person cannot and should not be identified with his or her education. This idea of Eckhart makes us even more sensible for the special act of being a teacher or a minister. He needs to open up the learning space for personal storytelling and dealing with images, but he cannot decide whether or not a specific idea or representation will be successful in the learner’s mind. The teacher can make a case, but he cannot make a person. This responsibility – to deal with one’s own personhood – belongs to the secret of the human person who is learning.

Eckhart’s theology of education

In the framework of RE this vision implies a radical deconstruction of religious and theological images as well. Only when the learner has left all the images of goddesses

²⁰ M.BRAEKERS, *Meister Eckhart*, pp.36-37.

²¹ D.MIETH, *Meister Eckhart. Gotteserfahrung und Weg in die Welt*, p.26.

²² M.BRAEKERS, *Meister Eckhart*, p 56.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp.59-60.

behind, according to Eckhart, the real Deity can be revealed (*Gottesgeburt*). Thus in RE as well a radical *Ent-bildung* needs to take place so that a new *Um-bildung* can happen. Our images of God, of church, sacrament, holy scripture, religious experience and even of religious education (!) need to be dismantled as well. This is not easy at all, because almost every action in RE is based on affirmative theology, (*theologia positiva*), on defining and finding religious language for our deepest “ultimate concerns” (Paul Tillich), together with young people, and based on the long standing traditions of our faith communities.

But when we dwell in the “suburbs of language” (Ludwig Wittgenstein), when we get lost in translation or we lose grip because words for our deepest concerns and longings are vanishing, when the eloquent psalmist in ourselves becomes tacit, then we feel rather helpless. The tradition of apophatic theology (*theologia negativa*) then comes into play and makes us aware of the deep meaning of silence and not-knowing. I have learned from Meister Eckhart, living at the time that the great (positive) theological tractates were written by Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus, that the true God can only break through (*Durchbruch*), when the human person has destroyed all his human images of God and has become radically receptive (*Gelassenheit*) for something new to happen: God in his completeness and universality entering the human person in his fragility and particularity (*Gottesgeburt*).

Meister Eckhart uses the metaphor of the empty hands. Who wants to accompany children and young people in human flourishing needs to train himself deliberately in letting-go. It means to give up one’s own preoccupations and images and to dedicate oneself to the unique mysterious depth of the other, knowing that only there wonder can occur. The teacher stands guard at the unicity of the young person, so that the latter can tell his story, even though nothing “educational” seems to happen or needs to happen. This step is paradoxical, empty and silent, at the opposite side of pedagogical-didactical activism. How can we make young people receptive for such a “curriculum of passion”.²⁴ The four steps of Meister Eckhart can be formulated as a challenge to RE, as a way of reframing radically our work with young people. In the book of the American practical theologian Kenda Creasy Dean on working with youth I found the remarkable idea of a spiritual journey in three steps by the systematic theologian Sarah Coakley, which I could easily combine with Meister Eckhart’s four stages of spiritual development.

Stage 1 – Meister Eckhart’s Deconstruction (of the goddesses) and “Receptivity” (<i>Gelassenheit</i>)	Stage 1 – Sarah Coakley – purgative stage ²⁵
Stage 2 – Meister Eckhart’s breakthrough (<i>Durchbruch</i>) and “Birth of Deity” (<i>Gottesgeburt</i>)	Stage 2 – Sarah Coakley – illuminative stage ²⁶
Stage 3 – Meister Eckhart’s “Nobility of the Soul”	
Stage 4 – Meister Eckhart’s “Purity of God’s Nature” (<i>Visio Beatifica</i>)	Stage 3 – Sarah Coakley – unitive stage ²⁷

²⁴ K.C. DEAN, *Practicing Passion. Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*, pp.161-172.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.163-165.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.165-169.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 169-172.

The implications of this spiritual vision on the teacher-with-the-empty-hands on the professional development of the teacher as a guide in fostering identity, celebrating diversity and building community are manifold and need further reflection. As far as I am concerned this vision offers a valuable and horizon expanding framework for this reflection.

Conclusion

The professional RE teacher: called to let go. Doesn't he need to prepare his lessons anymore? Does he only need to hope that illumination will break through in ways he cannot foresee? Does this spirituality of "open hands" mean that an organized didactics is not necessary anymore? The lessons of Meister Eckhart make us aware of at least three issues: (1) deepen your work as a professional with spirituality and make your life more receptive and thus more exciting; (2) keep on searching for a spiritual-theological language in your RE, although the appropriate words are often not available; (3) be aware of silence and distance in your daily work as a teacher.

The professionalism of the teacher will in this respect not be abolished, but deepened. The spiritual association (SA, see Banning above) of the teacher receives a new meaning and can motivate the teacher to deepen (IE) his content related RE work (KW) with children and young people (RP). It will stimulate him not to give up the risky business of working with young people on existential questions in a complex and globalizing world. It will stimulate him to enter the classroom always a-new as *holy ground*, not more but also not less.

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Recebido 08/07/2015

Aprovado: 23/07/2015