

## **You can talk about your cat, but you can also talk about your God.**

### **Witnessing in hermeneutical-communicative worldview education**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper explores the function of teachers' witnessing of faith in religious education in the context of diversity in the classroom. In hermeneutical-communicative religious education three teaching roles can be discerned: moderator, specialist, and witness. These roles aim to support students in their personal worldview identity development by investigative, creative and dialogical learning. However, witnessing seems to be aimed at the transmittal of a specific tradition. The concepts of witnessing, authenticity, moral agency, role model and self-disclosure are explored to shed light on witnessing in worldview education in the context of diversity. Especially, Ricoeur's philosophical and Biblical explorations of testimony help to clarify witnessing and to position this didactical role in the interreligious educational space of vulnerability and hospitality.

#### **Keywords**

Witnessing; hermeneutical-communicative learning; diversity; worldview education; testimony

#### **Introduction**

*"The tension that I experience is that I see the Bible as the word of God and thus as the truth. I would like to teach from that position. However, I do not do that so often, because I also have to deal with dissenters. Then I present it more like: the Christians believe that... This sometimes clashes with my identity as a Christian. I talk as if Christianity is one of the options "(Praamsma, 2014, p.10).*

The teacher in this quote describes a tension between his own worldview position and the plurality of the philosophy of life in the context of the school. There is a struggle visible between the various roles that he as a religious educator can take: the desire to testify of his truth and thus taking on the role of witness on the one hand, and the role of guide in the world of different religions and other worldviews on the other hand. In the background, the question of the objective of the subject of religion/worldview in education is: is it about the transmittal of faith, initiation into a certain tradition or is it about informing about the Christian and other religions? Because of his choice for a more distant role this teacher gets tangled up with the value of authenticity. With his own position in Christianity, how can he take on his role as a supervisor of worldview learning processes?

*"As a teacher I see myself mainly as an expert in the field of Christian faith and more as an information provider in the field of other religions (...) When a student asks me about my experiences in the field of Christian faith, I can share some of them. That is fundamentally different from my experience of convincing the student. I want to search for connection rather than for contradictions." (Praamsma, 2011, p.47).*

This teacher believes that it is not her task in religious education to be proselyting among the students, but rather to create space for sharing their own experiences of faith. When asked she carefully shares her experiences. She doesn't want to create division, but connection. What then is the purpose of witnessing? Is it a task to fulfil only on demand (as seems to be the case with this teacher). How can teachers testify and keep a dialogue going?

The quotes invite to a reflection on the content and function of the role of 'witness' as Pollefeyt has described for hermeneutical-communicative religious education (2011a) in the context of a growing

religious diversity in schools and school teams. Teaching worldview and religion within a hermeneutical-communicative frame work in the context of this diversity aims at the personal worldview identity development of students. Far from wanting to convince students of their own faith, teachers should support students in their search for meaning, using several didactical roles (Mulder & Van den Berg 2019a). Teaching worldview is a hermeneutical enterprise (Lombaerts & Pollefeyt, 2004) aimed at the attribution of meaning to the self and the world, in the perspective of religious and secular worldviews. Handling plurality in a religiously diverse society is one of the goals of worldview education.

Pollefeyt (2008, 2011a, 2011b) describes worldview education in terms of a multiple correlation didactics. Multiple refers to embracing a plurality of world interpretations as meaningful sources for students. Of course teachers in confessional education, like the Roman-Catholic context to which Pollefeyt refers most, can or must have a firm rooting in their own tradition, but their main goal must not be to convince students of its truth but to support them in a collective and private search for meaning in life. The dominant tradition in society (in Europe and America the Christian tradition) taken as a starting point for dialogue on meaning in life is exchanged for another point of departure: the hermeneutical intersection.

Hermeneutical intersections are moments in conversations about life in which a plurality of interpretations comes to light. Students come to understand that life situations can be experienced and interpreted differently in the light of a plurality of religious and non-religious worldview traditions.

For the conversation at these intersections, a teacher must, according to Pollefeyt, take on three hermeneutical roles: the specialist, the moderator and the witness. The *specialist* provides information on religions and philosophical worldviews. The *moderator* teaches students to talk about the significance of religion and philosophy of life in a dialogical and respectful way.

The role of *witness* indicates that the teacher is connected in a committed way to a worldview and this engagement is brought into the classroom conversation. The teacher is a witness to the tradition or traditions that he or she lives by and acts upon. By witnessing teachers act vulnerable: they show something of what touches them and puts them in motion. In this way they function as role models demonstrating how inhabiting a worldview is done.

### **Current discussion in worldview education: witnessing?**

In the current rethinking of the profession of religious educator in areas where secularization and increasing worldview diversity is visible most of the times there is no controversy about the relevance and necessity of the roles of moderator and specialist. As it comes to the role of specialist it is obvious that students need to become familiar with the range of worldview traditions (in their forms of appearance in holy books, organizations, rituals, sacred objects and places and so on) that is present in their society, to be able to recognize them and to be able connect them to scientific concepts concerning religious and non-religious worldviews. The teacher in the role of specialist is a guide who critically introduces students in the world of religion and philosophy of life in traditional and contemporary forms. Important goals for this role are the achievement of worldview sensibility and worldview literacy.

The role of moderator is equally and generally appreciated. Students should learn to be respectful of each other in a dialogue about religion and other belief systems which they see in the society around them and to which they are committed or by which they are influenced themselves. As a moderator, the teacher teaches the students how to do that and sets an example in inviting students to find multiple perspectives and discuss them critically. Goals associated with this role are the competence to perform a dialogue respectfully and the handling of diversity as an engaged and responsible

citizen.

It is the third role that Pollefyet named the witness, that raises questions. Het states *“In other words, the religious educator is someone who can and must witness to the traditions to which s/he has derived her/his own religious/ideological identity and from which such identity speaks, breathes and interacts.”* (Pollefyet, 2011a, p. 14). What functions does this witnessing fulfil in relation to the goals of hermeneutical-communicative worldview education? How can witnessing play its part in worldview teaching when this teaching is not aimed at convincing, but at guiding, moderating dialogue and challenging to respond to religious or non-religious worldview content (Mulder & Van den Berg, 2019a)? And wat purposes are intended in witnessing? For example, is the testimony aimed at the transmittal of worldview? Or is the testimony intended to contribute to the motivation of students for the contents of the subject at hand? Is it really desirable and necessary to adopt the role of a witness or can it be sufficient that a teacher provides information (concepts) and teaches the skills to dialogize? Must the worldview educator, working in the context of diversity, not be ‘neutral’ and let students search their own answers on life issues, not interfering in their processes of meaning making with an authoritative opinion connected to a position of power? Shouldn’t we skip this role because of its risk of dismissing the autonomy and freedom of choice of students?

To find some provisional answers to these questions regarding the legitimacy and functions of witnessing we will explore some concepts that help clarify the act of witnessing and situate it in the context of education. We acknowledge that addressing a clarification of the role of witnessing and its legitimacy is connected to normative choices with respect to learning about, into, from or for religion (De Kock, 2015). The answers we seek are embedded in our perspective on learning worldview or religion. We discuss witnessing within our normative framework of hermeneutical-communicative learning (Mulder & Van den Berg 2019a; Mulder & Van den Berg, 2019b).

We start with exploring some general concepts that seem to be present in the semantic realm of witnessing: self-disclosure, authenticity, modelling and moral agency. Then we take a look at the concept of witnessing borrowing some philosophical and Biblical notions from Paul Ricoeur, who uses the concepts ‘attestation’ and ‘témoignage’ (Jansen, 2002).

To probe the context of hermeneutical-communicative learning we describe some pedagogical theological choices of Pollefyet. We close with some thoughts on power, vulnerability and hospitality.

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### **Self-disclosure**

In witnessing people share something about themselves, something of importance, something connected to who they are. Research shows that self-disclosure – described as “any message about the self that a person communicates to an other” can fulfil important communicative and motivational functions (Cayanus, Martin & Goodboy, 2009). It plays a significant role in affective learning. Self-disclosure enhances student engagement and intensifies the communication in the classroom. It improves motivation and enforces affective learning (Cayanus, Martin & Goodboy, 2009). Is giving a testimony to be considered as a constructive form of self-disclosure? Is this self-disclosure only a bridge to the learning substance or does it serve more goals?

Research indicates that teachers proceed to self-disclosure to maintain and to promote credibility in their relationship with the students (Myers, Brann & Members of Comm 600, 2009).

Also, some older research shows that the teacher's personal convictions are the most important influencing factors in the classroom, more importantly than the teacher's training, educational philosophy or the learning tools (Brown, 2000, p. 60). Jeunen underlines this conclusion and holds a plea for a powerful usage of the testimony (Jeunen, 2010). At least witnessing shares some features of self-disclosure.

## **Authenticity**

We would like to point out that that witnessing fits in an educational climate in which authenticity is valued (Kreber et al., 2007). Not only should schools foster authenticity of the students as a contribution to formation, but also teachers would be empowered when becoming authentic teachers who are more defined by themselves than by others. Living in an 'age of authenticity' religion and worldview have become a matter of choice and subject to "expressive" individualism' (Taylor, 2007). In the quote of the teacher above we can discern a willingness to disclose herself as a Christian. When she is asked by a student about her experiences in faith she wants to share them. Teaching is a profession of personal involvement, and a teachers identity is a personal fusion of aspects 'coming from within' that are uniquely belonging to the self and aspects that lie 'beyond the self' (Kreber, 2010). Social norms, standards and convictions of the professional teaching community interact with who I am as a person, with my psychological and worldview make-up.

Although authenticity can be seen as a slippery concept literature and teachers personal convictions concur that sincerity, candidness and honesty are building blocks of authenticity (Kreber, 2010).

Teachers do not want to hide anything or be a 'fake'. Authenticity can be seen as the expression of a genuine self (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). The content of the self-expression has to be negotiated with regard to the personal and professional goals which are pursued and to the societal and professional constraints that limit self-expression. Teachers want to be authentic in expressing their identity. This also counts for aspects of their personal identity like their sexual and religious identity. You can talk about your cat, but you can also talk about your God. The longing for authenticity can lead to a religious testimony.

Authenticity, however, is not pure self-expression only for the reason to be disclosing yourself as a teacher, but authenticity surmounts self-interest because it aims at a horizon of significance, a greater good (Kreber et al. 2007, p. 35). In worldview education this could mean that authentic teachers not only show their involvement in religious or non-religious worldviews but also share and discuss that this subject matters in the real world and in the lives of teachers and students (Kreber et al., 2007, p.37). Authentic candidness and honesty about personal drives and inspiration connected to worldview sources must be aimed at clarifying the meaning and relevance of worldviews in a world of diversity.

## **Role model**

In educational practices modelling is discussed as a new and successful teaching strategy. Instead of solely conveying information teachers show what they teach; they model the content for learning in their behavior and accompany that sometimes with reflections from theory. In the context of teacher educators, one of the goals for modelling is the 'contribution to the professional development of students' (Lunenberg, Korthagen & Swennen, 2007). Transferring this to witnessing in the classroom modelling would serve the goal of contributing to the development of a worldview identity of the students. The way a teacher lives his worldview sets an example that could be followed by the students. Theory considers modelling a powerful tool, especially when this modelling is done explicitly – thinking aloud-, is applied to the lives of the student, and is connected to theory. Research also finds that this kind of modelling is hardly practiced, due to lack of skills and knowledge (Lunenberg, Korthagen & Swennen, 2007). The concept of role model invites worldview educators to rethink witnessing as a kind of modelling, and to explore the skills and knowledge needed to model fruitfully.

## **Moral agency**

Generally speaking teaching is intrinsically a moral practice (Hanson, 1998). When we are speaking in the context of witnessing we want to point to the role of the teacher as a moral agent. In a

sometimes divided society, with young people chasing extreme ideals, uttering polarizing or discriminating opinions in the classroom, an appeal goes out to teachers to create learning environments in which all students experience space for acceptance and learning. Moral agency does not stop by what teachers teach, but comprises how teachers act (Campbell, 2004). A moral agent as a witness refers to the moments in which the teacher has to show his moral convictions in situations where disrespect, discrimination, humiliation, bullying and other varieties of harmful behavior occur. Creating pedagogical safety in a kind of permissiveness to malignant behavior because 'everybody is has the right and room to say what he or she thinks right' is not enough. We need brave teachers creating brave spaces (Verduzco-Baker, 2018). We need prophetic witnesses who speak up, right from their heart, sharing their moral emotions and convictions rooted in their worldview. This does not mean that students may not share their convictions, but it means that harmful convictions have to be critically deconstructed at the hermeneutical intersections where all students must feel safe and free to be at that intersection as equals, traveling towards wisdom. In moral agency an aspect of witnessing comes to the fore: the disclosure of moral boundaries rooted in a religious or non-religious worldview.

### **Witnessing according to Ricoeur<sup>i</sup>**

In general usage the word witnessing means to report on what is seen, felt or heard according to the person. This report, which can be called a testimony, is always, of course, an interpretation in words of the experience spoken about. These words are addressed to an audience of one or more persons and so the act of reporting has to be seen in a communicative context. It functions as a means to convince the listener(s) of the truthfulness of the testimony. The witness wants to be believed. Testimonies refer to a legal context where there is a debate about the truth. Testimonies have influence on the decisions of judges as they are used as evidence (Jansen, 2002, p. 65). A testimony can be true or false- and therefore it has to be critically evaluated. Testimony also involves the witness as a person ('I have seen', 'I heard', 'I believe'). A witness attests him or herself. Sometimes it can be dangerous to function as a witness, and a testimony can be seen as an engagement with the truth. In witnessing a person stands for the truth as experienced and interpreted.

Ricoeur rejects the concept of absolute truth, and in witnessing people use speech acts that produce less than empirical certainty but more than subjective opinions. A condition is that witnesses have to have credibility to be believed, and also they have to be reliable. Their involvement demonstrates truthfulness when they themselves believe in their testimony and act accordingly (Jansen, 2002, p. 78).

Referring to the Bible, Ricoeur points out that witnesses are sent to witness by God. Their testimony is about experiences of the witness in his or her time and context and it reports about the involvement of God in the events. God attests himself in the narrative of the testimony. Prophets witness to the one true God in the Old or First Testament. In the gospels and in Acts the testimony is attached to the work of Jesus. Although the testimony can be read as a confession it never loses the connection to the reports of eye and ear witnesses. The content of the testimony always refers to the acts of Jesus. Jesus is depicted as the Son of God. God is involved in the act of witnessing in the New or Second Testament.

Jansen (2002, p. 86/87) points at two kinds of interpretation when we hear the testimony about Christ: first we are invited to interpret the content, f.e. "Jesus is lord"; and second we have to decide whether this is a true or false testimony. Believers will never have absolute certainty about truth about God, and are at the same time again and again depending on truthful testimonies.

What do we learn from these Ricoerian philosophical and Biblical remarks? First, witnessing is not preaching confessions or dogma's from an authoritative position but sharing lived experience. It

speaks to the heart and the imagination even more than to reason. Second, it is not sharing the truth but sharing experience in words of own interpretation that are open for debate and discussion. Third, witnessing is connected to the wish to be believed as a witness, so it is about authenticity and truthfulness. Fourth, witnessing is always about *my* experience, it is sharing the self. And fifth, witnessing is a vulnerable act: you may or may not be believed. You can be rejected, especially when your testimony has prophetic content with moral judgements. With the words of the New Testament: a prophet has no honor or acceptance in his home town (John 4,44; Luke 4,24).

### **Backgrounds of Pollefeyt's role of the witness**

In religious education Pollefeyt does not search for a neutral or non-committed transfer of knowledge about religion nor does he want to promote to convince the absolute truth stemming from one religion. Learning about worldview is according to his hermeneutical-communicative perspective a dialogical search for truth in which several options are to be reviewed, deconstructed and tested. Nevertheless, this collaborative search for meaning, taking wisdom from several worldview sources, is always an engaged activity. Students are invited to take position and the teacher is expected to be living, speaking and teaching as a person with a clear worldview identity. So the dialogue Pollefeyt fosters at the hermeneutical junctions in the classroom is a dialogue of engaged people. In this dialogue there is room for a critical examination of several perspectives. Teaching a certain religion is best done by an adherent of that tradition. In the context of Roman-Catholic education this means that Pollefeyt prefers that the subject of Roman-Catholic religion should be taught by devout Catholics (Pollefeyt, 2011a). This does not imply relativism, but for the sake of the dialogue it means some and temporary distance of one's own truth claims (Pollefeyt, De Vlieter & Smit, 2011c). A hermeneutical position means that truth is not fixed but always interpreted in the context of life situations and that a religious identity is also not fixed or finished but always changing. From this flexible identity a teacher testifies: "A teacher bears witness of his or her own constructed, particular, Christian synthesis of faith, and its being under construction". (Pollefeyt, 2011b, p. 6).

This witnessing takes part in the context of diversity and pluralization of visible traditions in our society. Pollefeyt's concept of religious-education is therefore a proposal of interreligious education that uses multi-correlation instead of mono-correlation. The experiences of students are connected to more than one worldview tradition, because the plausibility for mono-correlation has vanished in a plural society. When plurality is mirrored in the student body the ingredients are there to create a dialogue in which mutual witnessing takes place and multi-correlation can be given form. But what about equality and the power that comes with the position of the teacher? How can religious educators honor the autonomy and freedom of the students to make choices that do not concur with their testimonies?

The attitude in which witnessing takes place has to be shaped by some important convictions to enable the creation of a safe space for a genuine process of searching for meaning.

The first conviction is that teachers realize that their own truth is just that. Pollefeyt states that truth is an eschatological concept that lies in the future (Pollefeyt, 2011a, p. 15). Truth owns the middle ground between ontology and relativism. It is never to be reached definitely and the human being as a hermeneutical creature looking for meaning and able to deliberate reasons of existence (Pollefeyt, 2011b, p. 13) is searching for meaning until he dies. Realizing that truth is a good that no one possesses fully teachers might see their testimony as a contribution to a collaborative search for meaning. They should hold an open and curious concept of truth. Impartiality is a condition and a skill that can be learned, even by teachers holding strong beliefs (Jackson & Everington, 2017).

The second conviction that can shape an attitude that fosters an open dialogue of mutual witnessing

is that of abductive learning. According to Pollefeyt an approach that seeks the middle position between inductive learning (starting correlation from experience) and deductive learning (starting correlation from tradition). Abductive learning awards a great responsibility to students who search in their biography and experience what they already know of traditional wisdom. This knowledge is challenged in new experiences, interpretations and thought experiments. The correlations between experiences and traditions are not imposed by the teacher, but discovered and explored (Pollefeyt, 2011b, p. 10). The testimony of the teacher must be seen as a modest contribution of discovery and exploration, being an example of correlation that the teacher found in his or her own biography. A third conviction is a didactical one: the teachers see learning religious or non-religious worldview as an open process in which purposive correlating is sustained. Although pedagogically religious learning is seen within the perspective of multi-correlation lessons are non-correlatively structured. This protects teachers from all too easily and quickly correlation experiences to wisdom of a certain tradition. Correlating too facile may close the students for new interpretations, questions and thought experiences as it may look as if the answer to a certain question is already there. Continuous questioning keeps the learning process going and within this process of questioning the testimony of the teacher may take place.

Keeping these three convictions in mind the role of the witness in hermeneutical-communicative education can be described as follows (Pollefeyt, 2011b, p. 18): *“a readiness to dare to lead religious and Christian conversations as well as preceding in games, expressions, emotions and spirituality. In doing so, the teacher does not see him or herself as the one path, truth, and life, but as a guide, or rather as the person that shows students cliffs and beacons, traps and points of reference in their search for meaning. It is therefore important that the teacher is in touch with the deeper (or higher) layers of him or herself and of the students.”*

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### **Testimony, power and hospitality**

We close with the theological perspective of hospitality: inviting students to discover and develop their own identity in an open space of mutual witnessing is an act of hospitality. This act does not exclude but does indeed include the act of witnessing. Witnessing is not an act of power or coercion. It does not limit or close the possibilities of the other, but as a fragile testimony it opens up new ways of understanding faith (Moyaert, 2011). In education sometimes witnessing is seen as opposed to respect for persons to make their own choices. Respecting persons is respecting differences (Baurain, 2007). Speaking from a Christian perspective all people deserve to be respected equally, regardless their differences. Of course there are example of Christianity and other religions in which there is little room for diversity because of their contention of the existence of an absolute truth (which they possess). Even if one might define witnessing as ‘living out one’s beliefs in purposeful ways so as to persuade others also to accept them as true’ (Baurain, 2007, p.210) this does not necessarily has to lead to a praxis of disrespecting other views and narrowing down the space for differences.

Witnessing can only be fruitful when performed in an attitude of humility and hospitality.

Respecting the hermeneutical condition in worldview education we do not believe an absolute or object truth about human existence is available. In the context of institutionalized or personal religious or non-religious worldviews people pursue a good life in their own ways. We consider this diversity as positive and as an invitation to hermeneutical openness for the otherness of the other, which is a difficult virtue (Moyaert, 2011, p. 277). In a situation of diversity witnessing is a vulnerable act because the certainty of the witness can be disputed, and the testimony can be rejected.

Nevertheless, certainty cannot be imposed but can only be shared in a humble and hospitable way in an open dialogue, because we recognize and acknowledge the fragility of our wisdom, listening to the wisdom of others. Teachers should consider their structural position of power and always invite

students to critically discuss their fragile testimony. In that way they act out hospitality in an attitude of humility.

### **Conclusion**

Let us wrap up what we found. Witnessing as a concept relates to some general educational concepts. We can say it is embedded in a conceptual network (authenticity, role model, self-disclosure, moral agency) and shares some features of these concepts that describe aspects of education. It fulfils functions related to these general concepts: f.i. witnessing motivates in the way self-disclosure motivates, it makes a learning situation genuine like authenticity does.

Furthermore we stressed that witnessing can help student develop their personal identity, because by default a testimony is open for discussion. Whether or not a testimony is believed depends on truthfulness. Whether or not a testimony leads to adopting the same worldview depends on the subsequent critical discussion and personal views and choices of the students.

Witnessing can have prophetic qualities (moral agency), and a teacher can be obliged to speak up against all kinds of unwanted behavior.

Witnessing, however, has to be performed under certain conditions, based on some convictions that fit a hermeneutical approach. It has to be performed as an act of hospitality. Then it can serve as a productive didactical role in hermeneutical-communicative worldview education.

So, witnessing by teachers of their experiences and personal knowledge related to their own worldview can be a meaningful resource in the classroom when performed within the boundaries of the hermeneutical-communicative framework.

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<sup>i</sup> In this section we follow the interpretation of Ricoeur from Jansen (2002, pp. 64-88).