

KENOSIS, HUMAN FLOURISHING AND SOLIDARITY: RE-THINKING THE GOAL OF EDUCATION IN LATE-MODERNITY

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Summary

This paper explores arguments for a renewed reflection on the goal of education in Late Modernity. What do we mean when we educate children and young people for the future? What are the implications of the highly individualized competence development and assessment models for teaching and learning in contemporary European schools? What is the role and status of social learning activities at school? Are they only a necessary didactical tool for kids to deal constructively and peacefully with *differences* in the classroom and society? Or do they also offer a courageous vision on how to (learn to) accept the radical *otherness and vulnerability* of the other in the classroom and society? In the first part of this paper I present the idea that in a globalizing world, struggling vehemently with an economic but above all a spiritual crisis, a renewed reflection on ‘living and learning *together*’ is needed. Solidarity and human flourishing can include one another. With the concept of ‘kenosis’ I argue in the second part of the paper that the Christian tradition has a valuable framework to consider this tension theologically. In the final part of the paper five implications of this vision for the innovation of (religious) education are discussed.

Key words

Philosophy of education, theology of education, human dignity, education goals, school development

Introduction

What do we live for? What do we learn for? “Live to tell”, would be the answer of the novelist (Gabriel Garcia Marquez) and the pop star (Madonna). “Learn to live to tell”, would be the answer of the educator. Life as such does not exist. There is only narrated life, life in search of human beings with hearts and bones, who are able to articulate what they experience and believe through language, however vulnerable this may be. This ability implies a learning process: sharpening the perception of the surrounding world, learning to express oneself and learning to communicate with others. Both living and learning are aiming at participation in “the ongoing conversation of humankind” (Michael Oakeshott). In this contribution I present a concept of education in which the recognition of human *imperfection*, life as a *growing process* and learning as a *practice of solidarity* are central dimensions of narrative identity development. It is my contention that in the contemporary view on society and school these dimensions are neglected and need to be revitalized.¹

¹ B. Roebben, *Living and learning in the presence of the other. Defining religious education inclusively*, in *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 15 (2011) [DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2011.552648]; B. Roebben, *Scholen voor het leven. Kleine didactiek van de hoop in zeven stappen*, Leuven/Den Haag, Acco, 2011, 43-60 [Schools for life. Small didactics of hope in seven steps]; B. Roebben, *Das Abenteuer “Mensch-werden”*, in *Katechetische Blätter* 137 (2012) 4, 241-247 [The adventure of becoming human].

1. Living and learning together

It is striking to see how deeply the ideology of the market place has influenced the European educational space in the last decades. The concepts are *legio* (and mostly articulated in English, which is considered to be the top meritocratic language): “information highway”, “knowledge economy”, learning with “input and output”, “management” of learning processes, focusing on educational “standards” and “competencies”, etc. Pupils and students are closing a “contract” with the school, they deliver their “achievements” and they can expect achievements from their teachers. With the focus on a growing individualization of education, solidarity in the classroom is fading away. Every person is responsible for him/herself. Schools are doing their best to offer highly complex and individualized programs for their demanding “clients”. And the latter are doing their best in turn “to adapt to the system”. What should have been providing more freedom, namely education, becomes a strait-jacket. Not the human being with his/her inalienable dignity stands in the middle, but the issue, namely the augmentation of knowledge. The individual is expected to appropriate the received knowledge, to add his/her small contribution and then to hand this over to the next generation. People become solipsistic producers of knowledge. The strategies of privatization in the public realm of the school are giving birth to “strategies of immunization”.² The concern for the real other – the one who does not bring me necessarily financial or intellectual gain – disappears. Human beings are becoming rivals in money and knowledge production.

We need a conscious return to a personalist concept of education. Human beings have the right to grow *as* a human being, to develop *as* a human being. This generic goal may not be understood as a means for something else. Qualitative education contributes to the integrity of the human being, empowers him/her to become the narrator of his/her own story – coherent and fulfilled. Over and over again this ideal needs to be reformulated. The question today seems to me how this ideal of human dignity can be reconsidered from a solidarity-standpoint – from the standpoint of the person as companion or fellow of the other in his/her search for dignity.

No human being is complete. Everybody is vulnerable. Moreover, human beings are not exchangeable. Everybody is unique and radically different from the other. These two experiences – vulnerability and uniqueness – culminate in the basic experience of the otherness of the other, conceptually crystallized in recent theories of the German RE discourse,³ which in turn reflect on recent developments in intercultural and interreligious learning processes at school. These scholars confirm the idea that human beings are radically strange to one another and that they precisely therefore are delivered to each other in language and communication. There is no other way to become human, unless by education and dialogue. It is an interesting ascertainment to see how this development is taking place internationally, both on the academic and professional level. In this respect we urgently need

² J. Masschelein & M. Simons, *Globale immuniteit: een kleine cartografie van de Europese ruimte voor onderwijs*, Leuven, Acco, 2003; M. Simons & J. Masschelein, *The Public and Its University: beyond learning for civic employability?*, in *European Educational Research Journal* 8 (2009) 204-217.

³ In chronological order: A. Müller-Friese, *Miteinander der Verschiedenen. Theologische Überlegungen zu einem integrativen Bildungsverständnis*, Weinheim, Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1996; U. Greiner, *Der Spur des Anderen folgen? Religionspädagogik zwischen Theologie und Humanwissenschaften*, Münster, Lit-Verlag, 2000; R. Boschki, „Beziehung“ als Leitbegriff der Religionspädagogik, Ostfildern, Schwabenverlag, 2003; B. Grümme, *Vom Anderen eröffnete Erfahrung. Zur Neubestimmung des Erfahrungsbegriffs in der Religionsdidaktik*, Gütersloh/Freiburg-Basel-Wien, Gütersloher Verlagshaus/Herder, 2007.

more fundamental research in philosophical-educational (and theological-educational) anthropology: transatlantic comparisons e.g. between Martin Buber, Emmanuel Lévinas, Hannah Arendt en John Dewey, or more recent work of e.g. Helmut Peukert, Hans Joas, Charles Taylor, and others.⁴

One example of a new insight on human flourishing in and through dialogue comes from the Russian Federation. New forms of human communication are needed, thus the Russian RE scholar Fedor Kozyrev: especially the spiritual one.⁵ Or even better, this communication already exists; it should only be unlocked in daily communication. How can this happen? Well, the human being is in his/her otherness always searching for self-clarity and self-understanding – and in this effort it collides with other human beings on the search as well. The dialogue as the encounter of these two becomes itself a “source of knowledge”,⁶ sparkling from the depth of the encounter. Two souls are then meeting each other. On a deeper level every person remains different from the other in finding the meaning of life, but precisely in this difference they both can find *each other* as an answer to that search. The possibility of the answer is prevailing, not the perfection of the answer. By opening oneself to what Kozyrev calls, together with Mikhail Bakhtin, an “alternative coordinate system”, another way of perceiving reality, shown by a fellow human being in living and learning, one receives a new insight in one’s past and future, one becomes a new human being, closer to one’s own presence – the latter literally understood as being there, being response-able here and now. Through *de-centration* of myself and *de-dication* to the other, I grow in becoming fully human. Real human flourishing is then taking place. The German philosopher Hans Joas confirms the spiritual dimension of this encounter and coins the term „self-transcendence“, which is „ein Ergriffensein von etwas, das jenseits meiner selbst liegt, eine Lockerung oder Befreiung von der Fixierung auf mich selbst“.⁷

2. Theology of incarnation

This educational ideal of „growing in shared humanity“ can have (but must not!) its foundation in Christian theology. The human being is made in the image of God and he/she is called (or pro-voked) to become perfect “as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5, 48). This is not about spotlessness, but about focusing the human existence on true humanity or true human flourishing, on maturity, wholeness and completeness. The human person is called to become whole and holy in his/her quality as a human person, namely as a fellow or companion. The Jewish-Christian creation story offers a future vision, a permanent challenge to develop from fact to alternative, from ‘is’ to ‘it could be otherwise’, from self-development to living-in-dedication. I can see this longing in contemporary youth when they hope “to make this world a better place”, politically translated e.g. in the “millennium goals”.

⁴ I dream of intensive comparative research, in line with e.g. R.R. Osmer & F. Schweitzer, *Religious Education between Modernization and Globalization. New Perspectives on the US and Germany*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003. For my own small contribution in the field of youth ministry, see B. Roebben, *International Developments in Youth Ministry Research. A Comparative Review*, in *Religious Education* 107 (2012) 2, 192-206.

⁵ F. Kozyrev, *The Roles of Dialogue in Religious Education. A Russian Perspective*, in D. Bates, G. Durka & F. Schweitzer (eds.), *Education, Religion and Society. Essays in Honour of John M. Hull*, London/New York 2006, 215-227.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁷ H. Joas, *Braucht der Mensch Religion? Über Erfahrungen der Selbsttranszendenz*, Freiburg/Basel/Wien, Herder, 2004, 17.

The event of the incarnation or becoming human of God in Jesus Christ is in the Christian theology both in substance as formally decisive of the commitment of human beings for and with one another. The Dutch philosopher Renée van Riessen⁸ has in line with the work of Emmanuel Lévinas convincingly demonstrated that the revelation of God always takes place in the form of ‘kenosis’, ‘emptyfying’ or dedication. God compromises Him/Herself by delivering Him/Herself in the human condition to the world, not only in the (classical) ways of Scripture and Sacraments, but in ordinary daily encounters, out there on the street.⁹ On the track of incarnation, this means when God withdraws from the absolute freedom to be God, He/She surrenders Him/Herself to the vulnerable image of a fellow human being who asks for our attention and hospitality. This is truly a creative act: deep human community and communication is coming into existence.¹⁰

Every human being can become in his/her otherness a guest but also a host for the other. We share *mutually*, as was mentioned before, the radical human experience of otherness, of vulnerability and difference. Moreover, human beings are gifted with reason, to define hermeneutically if and how they can become truly a fellow or companion to the other. De-centration of the self and de-dication to the other always imply a conscious decision that depends from many factors and circumstances. The revelation of God, understood as incarnation, must therefore always be spiritual-communicatively interpreted and tested. Therefore the Jewish and Christian traditions are “Bildungsreligionen” – educational religions. This is, according to the German religious educationalist Ralf Koerrenz,¹¹ the very central anthropological dynamic of the biblical tradition. Reading the bible to understand life means ‘learn to learn’ to understand life: everything could be different tomorrow, nothing can be extrapolated from today’s experience. Nothing, not even the biblical language game, is a mere fact. Everything is perception and interpretation. The Bible fundamentally considers the human being as a ‘learning existence’, always dealing consciously with reality and with the interpretation schemata to understand that reality. This is especially true, thus Koerrenz, in late modern societies in which people are constantly facing complexity and contingency.¹² Openness for living and learning conditions – what is the existential meaning of reality for me and for my fellow human beings, now and tomorrow? – are deeply engraved in an incarnational-theologically interpreted concept of education.

⁸ R. van Riessen, *Man as Place of God. Levinas’ Hermeneutics of Kenosis*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2007, 164-172.

⁹ “Gott kehrt – wie bereits Schelling deutlich macht – sein Innerstes nach außen, setzt sich dem Menschen aus und offenbart sich in seiner Schwäche für den Menschen. Denn Gott will nichts als die Liebe des Menschen und ist bereit, dafür alle Auswirkungen der von ihm umworbenen Freiheit auf sich zu nehmen und den Menschen also nur mit den Mitteln der Liebe für sich zu gewinnen“ [K. von Stosch, *Ekklesiologische Konsequenzen der Inkarnation*, in *Relis* 1 (2012) 2, 4-6, here 4]. Of course it is important to take into account the radical theological differences between Judaism, Christianity and Islam in this respect. At least one can argue that in the three Abrahamic religions the revelation of God has human characteristics.

¹⁰ “Der Gott, der vorbeigegangen ist, ist nicht das Urbild, von dem das Antlitz das Abbild wäre. Nach dem Bilde Gottes sein heißt nicht, Ikone Gottes sein, sondern sich in seiner Spur befinden. Der geoffenbarte Gott unserer jüdisch-christlichen Spiritualität bewahrt die ganze Unendlichkeit seiner Abwesenheit, die in der personalen Ordnung selbst ist. Er zeigt sich nur in seiner Spur, wie in Kapitel 33 des Exodus. Zu ihm hingehen heißt nicht, dieser Spur, die kein Zeichen ist, folgen, sondern auf die Anderen zugehen, die sich in der Spur halten“ (Emmanuel Lévinas, quoted by Walter Lesch, in U. Greiner, *Der Spur des Anderen folgen?* [note 3], 188).

¹¹ R. Koerrenz, *Hermeneutik des Lernens. Der anthropologische Wirklichkeitsbezug der biblischen Überlieferung*, in *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 12, 221-242.

¹² *Ibid.*, 237.

3. Innovation of (religious) education

What now are the consequences of the educational concept of “growing in shared humanity” – embedded in the Christian tradition of the incarnation – for education and school development in Europe? What could be the innovative dynamic in the midst of the great educational challenges that are facing our late modern schools and societies? About the normative character of this final part of the paper one could discuss. This is precisely my intention. While raising questions I open a discussion on what is really worthwhile for the future. This is a global exercise which can be done a local scale. As far as I can see five elements can be discerned as implications of the above elaborated concept of solidary education: imperfection, non-planning, slowification, community and silence.

First of all, schools should be places, where people are allowed to be imperfect and can learn from their mistakes. The words of the Jewish philosopher of education Hanan A. Alexander are very clear in this respect:

“Living up to an ideal was not the product of some external force, some hand other than my own; rather it was a result of a decision I made, a discipline I imposed upon myself, a behavior I learned to perform. There may have been other hands in the mix – parents, friends, teachers, lovers, even God. But all the help in the world could not force me to do good if I choose otherwise. In the final analysis, I was the one who measured up. What I do and think matters. I make a difference. I can make an impact on the world. When I stray from the path I believe to be right, even when the price is high and very little appears to be in my control, all is not lost. I can learn; I can return; I can repent; I can change (...). Not only do I matter; I matter just the way I am. This is the source of our deepest joy and greatest reason for celebration.”¹³

The ‘educated person’ is not a finalized product, a perfect or complete individual, but a human being with a history and a future, “at home on the road”¹⁴ – who lives for an ideal and who is prepared to overcome the barriers that can be found in his/her way.

The second implication relates to the radical openness of learning processes – openness for what cannot and should not be planned, for surprising questions, viewpoints and multi-perspectivity. What children and young people actually learn in the classroom cannot be “seen, smelled or heard” by the teacher.¹⁵ The most that he/she can do is orientate and adapt his teaching structure to the probable learning structure of pupils. Especially in the world of the new and social media this will lead us into radically new questions of educational research. We do not have the slightest clue what is awaiting us in this respect, which decisions should be made educationally and socially. One thing is clear: we will need to listen to the next generation, when we reconsider education, its goals and its relationship with tradition(s).

¹³ H.A. Alexander, *Reclaiming Goodness. Education and the Spiritual Quest*, Notre Dame (IN), University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, 155.

¹⁴ For a concept of education as pilgrimage, see B. Roebben, *Seeking Sense in the City. European Perspectives on Religious Education*, Berlin, Lit-Verlag, 2009, 113-115; see also B. Roebben, *Narthical Religious Learning. Redefining Religious Education in Terms of Pilgrimage*, in *British Journal of Religious Education* 31 (2009) 1, 17-27.

¹⁵ H. Meyer, *Was ist guter Unterricht?* Berlin, Cornelsen, 2009⁶, 168. See also B. Roebben, *Scholen voor het leven* [note 1], chapter 6 and 7.

Or, “a crisis of interpretation within any tradition eventually becomes a demand to interpret this very process of interpretation”...¹⁶

Furthermore there should be lots of interaction chances for children and young people to communicate philosophically and theologically with each other in the modus of (didactical) “slowification”.¹⁷ Fast food answers are not helpful in the digestion of slow questions! The materials of ‘children’s spirituality’ in the Anglo-Saxon world and ‘Kindertheologie’ in the German speaking world are helpful tools for kids to address difficult questions and to learn to deal with tensions in interpretation of these questions.¹⁸ Children have the right to consider the complexity of life – of what surrounds them daily – in order to discover their own, fragile but worthwhile narration – coherent and fulfilling. In the Netherlands the school subject RE is called “levensbeschouwing”, literally translated as “the consideration of life”. Too often schools leave the difficult life questions “out of consideration” – and therefore do not fulfill their task of offering kids a qualitative RE!

The fourth challenge is community building. Like was argued before, the question “What do we learn from this or that event, experience, conflict, etc.?” is a question-in-plural. Deep learning communities offer space for *COMMON* existential reflection and action. This goes hand in hand with slowification. Or, when we want to be sure that our classroom is safe for diversity, there needs to be a thorough and empathetic openness for those who remain silent, inarticulate, voiceless. De-centration and de-dication – giving the other a real voice – asks for awareness, attention, concentration.¹⁹

And finally the meaning and importance of silence should be mentioned here. “The core of everything is silent and endless”, so the Flemish poet Felix Timmermans. He/she who is astonished by reality, becomes silent. The recognition of the grandeur of the world and of the emergence of respectful knowledge are filled with silence and awe. Silence relates to concentration and asceticism: to stand the restlessness, to wait till inner rumors disappear, to receive a new vision and a new heart to see the world differently. In silence the human person can become very wide and full of mercy for him/herself and others. Parker Palmer refers in this respect to one of the desert fathers:

“Abba Felix leads his students into a wordless world. He wants to humble their language, to break down the illusions that we can create reality with our words. He knows where our words and our world come from – that true words and the true world are not mental constructs but a gift of grace, a gift we can receive only as we abandon the illusion that our knowledge manufactures the world. Abba Felix takes his students deep into desert silence, a desolate space where none of their mind-made structures can survive.”²⁰

¹⁶ D. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity. Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1987, 8.

¹⁷ B. Roebben, *Living and learning in the presence of the other* [note 1], 4.

¹⁸ G. Yde Iversen, G. Mitchell & G. Pollard (eds.), *Hovering over the Face of the Deep. Philosophy, Theology and Children*, Münster, Waxmann, 2009; B. Roebben, *Children’s Theology: Concepts and Contexts, Problems and Horizons*, in F. Kraft, H. Roose and G. Büttner (eds.), *Symmetrical Communication? Philosophy and Theology in Classrooms across Europe*, Loccum, RPI, 2011, 11-24.

¹⁹ U. Greiner, *Der Spur des Anderen folgen?* [Note 3], 286.

²⁰ P. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known. A Spirituality of Education*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1983, 42.

Conclusion

It may be clear that this educational analysis, this theological concept and these pedagogical recommendations must become concrete in order to be efficient. However, we may not omit the foundational discussion. When we expect from young people that they will participate sustainably and critically at the society of the future and develop these talents already at school, we as adults will need to take “into consideration” the pedagogical and theological presuppositions behind this concept of solidary learning. It is my contention that professionals in religious education can make a valuable contribution to this broader educational and social debate. They should not be shy to tell what they have learned. They should “tell to live to learn”...²¹

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²¹ Please feel free to react critically to this paper on hubertus.roebben@tu-dortmund.de