

Meaningful encounters – perspective-oriented religious education

Introduction

The changes in the last decades in the Dutch society reflect strongly on **religious education in the Netherlands**. In a few generations we have come to the situation where many students have no religious background, no experience with religious stories, gatherings or ritual forms of prayer. That is a generalized image. At the same time there are schools which are still strongly connected to the religious tradition and communities that support and direct them. In the media, religion is often problematized and framed as cause of differences and conflict. That raises the question **‘how to educate children and young adults, to know the meaning of religious phenomena, sources of inspiration and contemplation?’** and at the same time this is often reduced to: **what do they have to know? How to get it in their heads?** And as a teacher you have to be able to explain **Why is religion and worldview-education still relevant, or maybe even more important than ever before?**

Premiere: you have a premiere today as is the first time we present our view and developments in an international setting.

Big questions for 20 minutes. I will focus on three things:

1. The purpose of Religious education in our time, in our schools
2. The basis for the curriculum we developed in a perspective oriented approach of the curriculum
3. The urgency of teaching RE in our time

But first: Introducing myself

I realise it is good to say that I speak as a project-leader of Expertisecentre LERVO and also from my own experiences and beliefs. You should know that I was raised in a catholic family living near Rotterdam. My first professional orientation was to become a hotel manager, studying hospitality management. Through encounters with inspiring people and **monasteries** I discovered true hospitality and started to study catholic Theology. During my studies I started to teach at the Ignatius college Amsterdam.

There were no more Jesuits teaching in school, but their legacy was present. Education was directed towards a higher goal: school as a formation to find your vocation to contribute to a good future and a good society. After teaching for 14 years I left the school and started as an advisor and developer of curricula for civic education, ESD sustainable development and inclusive education. Leaving no one behind – the motto of the **sustainable development goals** – is a call that moves me very strongly.

1. The purpose of religious education in our time

Purpose: to what end do we teach? What do we want to contribute to the lives of our students and our world as a whole? In the Netherlands in general I see three different kinds of schools, with different purposes:

- In strict confessional schools, a homogenous population, connected with a faith-community, students **are initiated, informed and trained to understand their own**

tradition. (learning in religion, learning about, learning from) and often they learn about other religions. (religious studies and anthropological knowledge). The main purpose is to prepare them for participation in the faith community, and to lead a faithful and moral just life.

- In public schools (openbaar) there is a mixed student-population and a bias towards neutral and inclusive religious education. No one should feel offended. This results in a purpose that is formulated in terms of learning about the world religions and humanism as cultural and historical phenomena. The main purpose is to know the main character of the world religions and humanism.
- In confessional schools in a religious diverse society the student-population has shifted in the last decades, and the purpose is shifting with the change of the students and teachers. The name of RE has changed to 'worldview education' or for instance Life skills and Philosophy. (LEF). To be honest in these schools the purpose is often not clear and the relevance of teaching RE is often questioned. It depends on the teachers to convince schoolmanagement that their work really matters. About the purpose we find sentences like:
 - Students learn about world religions and develop their own worldview
 - Students learn to deal with existential questions and the different ways religions and humanism are an answer to these questions.
 - Students learn to explore the big questions of life and moral issues.

How do you think students are divided over these three types of schools?

Approximately

- 30 % go to public schools
- 50% go to confessional schools (645 schools, of which 6 islamic schools, 20 reformatoric en gereformeerd), of which 40% pluriform and 10% strict)
- 20 % go to Schools with a pedagogical fundament like Montessori and Dalton, Steinerschools etc.

LERVO-purpose:

As Bert Roebben stipulates in his recent publications, with **a pluriform student population and a society that sets religion apart as a private matter**, there is no ground to grow from the 'learning in, about and from religion' (Grimmitt). We chose to look for **a different purpose for a general curriculum in all secondary schools.**

Therefore: For a secondary school and its role in society **RE is part of the general formation and education** of all students which has to be congruent with the identity of the organization and communicated clearly to the students and their parents.

1. Following Roebben the purpose for the curriculum of LERVO is **to develop religious and worldview literacy**, which consists of orientational knowledge (knowledge frameworks), an understanding of what religion and worldview is and how it relates to being human, and attitudes and skills to investigate and dialogue in religious and moral, societal/ecological issues.
2. A second purpose is **to train/develop the skill of changing points of view:**
 - The bystander point of view that offers ways to question, knowledge and interpret traditions and social issues.
 - The inner point of view of the other who I try to understand.

- The inner point of view of the students themselves: What is my point of view, where do I stand, what does it mean to me?

These can be experienced differently for students:

- For secularly raised students the challenge will be that they are invited to engage with a religious point of view, which is not naturally comfortable to them.
- For religiously raised students the challenge will be to learn to look at their normal traditional worldview from a bystanders/outside's point of view.

2. The basis for a curriculum - A perspective-oriented curriculum for RE

(basis: [What is really worth teaching?](#), Fred Janssen)

There is an old discussion in the way curricula are oriented in general. This goes back to John Dewey, who discerned the knowledge oriented curriculum and the pupil oriented curriculum. To overcome this struggle Fred Janssen from Leiden University developed (as a biology scholar and teacher educator) the concept of a curriculum aimed at discerning what the essential approaches of subjects and ways of organizing knowledge are core of the discipline. In this way **your teaching becomes a way of being introduced to ways to get curious, knowing what questions to ask, how to find the meaning of the outcomes from different point of views**. His approach is translated for different fields of studies.

Ten perspectives for Worldview and religion

We used his approach, and discerned 10 perspectives for the study of religious phenomena, religious traditions and societal and ecological issues (which have their root-causes most often in worldviews of groups of people).

1. **Phenomenological perspective** – how do worldviews and religions function?
2. **Anthropological perspective** – what role do W&R play in the lives of people and societies
3. **Perspective of meaning** – what existential questions are basic to WR
4. **Historical perspective**- how do WR start and develop in time?
5. **Demographic perspective** – how many people are involved and where do I find them?
6. **Personal perspective** – what is my own worldview, and what means what I am learning for me?
7. **Ethical perspective** – how can we discern what is good to do or not to do?
8. **Comparative perspective** – what differences and correspondences between religions and worldviews are important
9. **Societal perspective** – how does knowledge from RW helps us to understand social issues better?
10. **Metaperspective** – What is religion and worldview, what concepts do we use and why does this matter?

What questions does these perspectives raise? (in the animation there are 9 perspectives - the tenth perspective: the ethical perspective, was added 6 mnths ago)

Translation into a course program and way of teaching

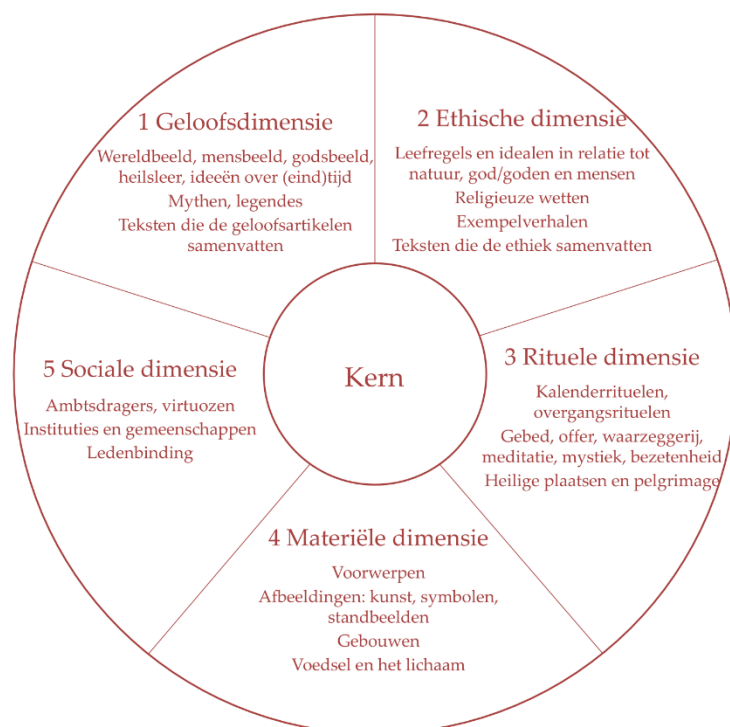
As **Bert Roebben** accentuates, this way of learning RE can be described as **Learning in presence of the other**. There can be students who are initiated in a religious tradition and student who are atheist or not aware of the existence of the transcendence at all. Together they are invited to become travelers/pilgrims and at the same time explorers and cartographers. The learning does not start with a teacher who knows and presents his or her knowledge, but with a question, an actual situation, a story that evokes the desire to know more, to investigate, to find meanings from different points of view.

In the first years **the teacher chooses what perspectives will be used** to approach a subject. Often there are two or three main perspectives used, sometimes with one or two side-perspectives (For example: the demographic perspective used to know how many

Voorbeeld Christian tradition

Historical perspective – family tree - Jesus as a Jew, connection to Judaism and Islam. Familiarity and differences. The different Christian traditions, schisms and their key points. Connection to humanism. Secularization in the west.

Fenomenological perspective: five dimensions of a religious tradition



Demographic perspective: where do christans live and how many are they?

Perspective of meaning: What experiences of wondering en finitude are central to Christian faith? What is questioned? Which practices or principles are central as an answer?

Personal perspective: how can I relate to this? What do I appreciate from my own POV?

Getting to know and use the perspectives

Through the curriculum the perspectives become the tools students learn to use and to help them understand and know religious traditions and practices from the earlier mentioned three points of view:

- Bystander/outsider POV
- Inner POV of the other(s)
- Inner POV of themselves

During the journey their capacities to change POV become stronger and the approaches form their skills and attitudes. It helps students to search for meaning hidden in religious traditions, other people and themselves, and **to become curious** to know more about it, explore sources....

This school year we work with teams of teachers on designing lessons and series of lessons to learn how this works out in practice.

3.Last: why RE is urgent

There are many reasons we, as professionals can think of. One of our important and difficult challenges is to convince policymakers, schoolmanagement, and even our own colleagues that RE has new relevance in our time.

No longer the future of a church, faith group or God given mission is central. It is the future of our youth and humankind as a whole.

In our society we signal or experience many crises – some scholars call this a polycrisis. They don't go away, so they are also called a permacrisis. They are caused by the way we see ourselves as a part of creation, the web of life, interbeing – or more precise by the way we don't see ourselves as parts of the whole world.

We need relational ways of knowing who we are as inhabitants of our common home, earth, as voices in the symphony of life, as receivers of life through other species. Religious thinking has this quality in stories, rituals, gatherings, moral reasoning about justice and solidarity. It reconnects us with ourselves, all beings around us and far away, and helps us to realise that we have received our world through our ancestors. To be good ancestors to coming generations we need a collective narrative that complements the technical, economical and individualistic narratives. Not to become richer, but to become more connected, and more human.

I hope that our work in Expertisecentre LERVO contributes to that.

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