

## **Stimulating Imagination. The Didactical Roles of Pollefeyt Revisited**

### ***Main concepts/issues***

In his hermeneutical-communicative model of religious education the Flemish pedagogue and theologian Didier Pollefeyt (2004) suggests that in pluralized European societies religious education should mediate between traditions and the student. This mediation ought to facilitate the process of attributing meaning to life. Tradition is a concept referring to all kinds of meaning systems, philosophies of life and religions. Starting from plural and conflicting interpretations of reality in the classroom the teacher addresses these hermeneutical nodes. He guides them to underlying themes that are connected to traditions. Confronted with these sources students are invited to make choices with regard to their own life story, and also to communicate these choices in words, signs and symbols. The teacher can take on three different roles to fulfill his hermeneutical task: the moderator, the specialist and the witness. The moderator helps students to navigate through the process of interacting complex and multifaceted correlations that they develop between their own experiences and religious and non-religious traditions. In the didactical role of the witness the religious educator communicates the convictions stemming from the sources and traditions out of which his religious identity is constructed. The teacher is not a neutral person in the land of world view and religion. Authentic teaching knows moments of self-disclosure in which aspects of spirituality are shared with the students. The third role is the specialist. A specialist provides a properly documented and scientifically solid background to the various life philosophies and religions which are presented and discussed in class. In this way he can also critically evaluate and/or deconstruct certain aspects of the religious/ideological traditions, both within and without Christianity.

This hermeneutical approach of Pollefeyt, operationalized in the three didactical roles has to be challenged from the perspective of imagination. Although there is some mentioning of ‘symbols’, or ‘spirituality’, many of the concepts he uses point in a cognitive direction (‘convictions’, ‘ontology’, ‘personal ideology’, ‘truth’).

We revisit his concept of religious traditions in the light of their metaphorical character and we examine Pollefeyts didactical roles from the perspective of imagination. The religious narratives which Pollefeyt frequently mentions are of symbolic, metaphoric nature. Our theory of religious education includes the fundamental principle of imagination as a central human faculty. This faculty opens envisioning of the possible and subsequent reflection on meaning. Religious traditions are worlds of imagination. They can be sources and means of edification. This edification will be most fruitful when the power of the imagination is used by the students.

The concept of imagination not only provides a better understanding of the sources and objectives of religious education but also gives rise to the hypothesis of the construal of a fourth didactical role. In our colloquium we give a preliminary design of this role : the imaginator. Imagination can be shaped in educational practice as metaphorical sensitivity, imaginative invention or creative interpretation (Van den Berg, 2014).

In religious education we aim at learning form the other/The Other. Imagination is a prerequisite for this process of edification. The possibility and ability of grasping meaning in symbols, rituals, myths and teachings of religious sources traditions, systems, organizations art or architecture, is grounded in imagination.

After an exposition of this fourth didactical role we reflect on the relationship between these four roles. Are they of equal importance and do they operate side by side? Or is it possible to suggest that the role of imaginator is fundamental to the other three. Is possible to educate as a

witness without an appeal to imagination? Is it possible to learn from a religious guide or specialist without imaginative power? Is it possible to exchange experiences and convictions without imagination?

### ***Description of methodology for addressing the topic***

This is a critical theoretical review of literature on imagination with regard to a critical hermeneutical perspective on religious education. Starting from a thorough review of Pollefeyt (2004) we use literature on the symbolic nature of religious sources and on objectives of religious education in a pluralized society to revisit Pollefeyt and to add to his material a fourth didactical role.

### ***Sources grounding the presentation***

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