About Constructing and Transmitting Meaning in a Religion Class

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ABSTRACT

The research presented investigates the paths to meaning in a Catholic religion classroom today in Belgium, using a combination of philosophy and theology to guide teenagers on their quest for meaning. The Belgian Catholic religion classroom is open to children with a variety of religious background, and the aim is to help each and every one grow on their own personal journey to humanization. To do so, a philosophical approach combining both construction of concepts and transmission of ideas, as well as a theological approach referring to various loci of meaning will be developed and articulated as a proposal for classroom works. Suggestions for teachers' academic training will derive from those analyses.

SECTIONS

Topic: Meaning of life in a religion class

Research question: In what ways can we construct or transmit meaning, as meaning of life in a Catholic religion classroom today, in a changing, pluralistic and secularized Belgian context, with the help of philosophy and theology.

Step 1: Research starts with an epistemological investigation of the concept of meaning to create a tool box that will be referred to throughout the rest of the work. The Walloon context is then analyzed (as it differs from the Flemish context in terms of educational choices, the denomination “Belgian” is less relevant), in terms of education, religious education and students relating to those classes and to questions of meaning. The CRER, or Center for Research on Education and Religions, has lead an enquiry among 1650 secondary school students on the themes of their own religion classes, meaning and plurality, which will add an empirical perspective to this work. The students' “outside context” will be sketched out briefly, to help future suggestions answer contemporary challenges.

Step 2: A more philosophical and theological analysis follows, based on the works of Jean Ladrière and Adolphe Gesché. A first definition of philosophy as a quest to wisdom is drawn here, as well as the means by which we can construct (philosophy as a tool) or transmit (philosophy as a corpus) meaning in a classroom and how both approaches are necessary today. Follows a section articulating a philosophical rationality and a theological rationality, to keep the two domains to their respective fields and succeed in combining them without altering any in essence. Theology follows, with a proposal for various loci in which meaning can arise, linked to meaningful attitudes on part of the teacher.

Step 3: The final section and chapters return to the classroom praxis by examining how our findings can be applied, crossing them with contextual elements developed earlier. The aim is also to help academic practices evolve by suggesting
specific paths of action in religion teachers’ training at the university. A few examples (from Belgium to India and Singapore) will be studied and paralleled with this project to show how things can be done in a very practical way, and to foster the realization of the model presented here.

**Theories and core references:** The main references are a hundred percent Belgian, Jean Ladrière for philosophy and Adolphe Gesché for theology. Theologians Bert Roebben and Graham Rossiter’s writings will also be highly referred to, as well as those of various philosophers (Paul Ricoeur, Henri Bergson, Matthew Lipman, etc.). Much of Jean Ladrière’s studies centers on rationality’s various realms. As a Christian philosopher, he embraced both philosophy and theology, showing how they can dialogue in most positive ways but also how theology is necessary to help reason go beyond itself and reach true horizons of meaning. As a philosopher, he insisted on going back to philosophy’s primal meaning as a path to wisdom, thus major support on a journey to meaning. Theologian Adolphe Gesché always had a love affair with philosophy, which makes him the perfect counterpart to our Christian philosopher. He is famous for publishing a series of books: “Dieu pour penser”, with “God” as a word that can help everyone think today, believers and non-believers alike, essential in a pluralized classroom. The seventh volume is devoted to meaning in relation to freedom, identity, destiny, hope and imagination, which fit perfectly Pr. Roebben’s proposals for becoming a “crispy teacher”, may we say a hope generator.

**Innovation in the field of religious education:** This works is being conducted in a time of great changes for the religion class in Belgium, as secular tendencies in the government are trying to suppress them from our schools and to replace them with citizenship classes where philosophy will be taught and religious matters overlooked. In a time when Europe is facing secularization as well as fundamentalists’ attacks on its grounds, it is more important than ever to keep religions inside schools, and offer every child a way to think about religion, in religion. The study here is a proposal articulating philosophy as might be mandatory in the future citizenship classes with theology and an approach to world religions, in a way that helps every pupil build his own identity, dialogue with plurality and embark in his own special and unique quest for meaning and freedom.

The goal is also to develop innovative proposals for teachers’ training in the academic world, that will help them become true meaning constructors and transmitters.

**Status of the research at time of proposal:** Much reading has been done as well as some writing. The thesis plan and chapters proposals have been examined and validated by the PhD director, Pr. Henri Derroitte from the Université Catholique de Louvain, and the committee in charge with much enthusiasm.