

Editorial

Epilogue—“There is a Crack in Everything . . . ”

K. H. (Ina) ter Avest ^{1,2,3} 

¹ Em. Professor in ‘Education and Philosophy of Life’, Inholland University of Applied Sciences, OZW Building, De Boelelaan 1109, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands; khteravest@gmail.com

² Former senior lecturer Pedagogics of Religion, VU University Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

³ Independent researcher, www.inateravest.nl

Received: 19 June 2019; Accepted: 26 June 2019; Published: 28 June 2019



In the contributions to this Special Issue, a wealth of context-related approaches and reflections on the relationship between education and religion have been brought together. The various contributions, with their presented examples, case studies, and research results, each stimulate in a unique way the ongoing exploration and elaboration of the relationship between education and religion in the secularised/secularising world of today and tomorrow—with its cracks in the sacred canopy.

In the Introduction to this publication, I wrote that the concept of secularisation is contested, referring to the decrease of the influence of institutionalised religion in the public domain, as well as to the fact that believing in God does not go without saying anymore. Up to that point, ‘religion’ and ‘God’ are seen as an integer and complex whole, connected with belief, and concretised in rituals. Without knowing much about religion(s), however, a person can be touched, inspired, and comforted by participation in rituals or by being in the presence of what is called materialised religion. The wide-spread horror expressed at the destruction of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan’s Bamiyan valley in 2001 and the prayers in front of the burning fire of the Notre Dame in Paris in 2019 are just a couple of examples of openly and publicly expressed emotional involvement in religious statues and architecture, respectively. Like the headline of a newspaper stated: ‘Burning Notre Dame touches the soul of France’. Religion is the soul of a culture [1]. The performative power of materialised religion and religious rituals cannot be overestimated; participation in rituals realises religion as ‘the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine’ [2] (p. 42); [3] (p. 24). In the contributions to this Special Issue, the relationship between education and religion(s) is explored, in most cases without explicit reference to God. The question pops up—is there a space for religion without God within education in our secularised/secularising age [4]? In their dialogical essays, the philosophers De Boer and Groot [4] point to what they perceive as a persistent misunderstanding—that religion would consist of dogmas wrapped up in a verbal and physical cover of texts, rituals, customs, and so forth. According to this understanding, the belief system and the dogmas form the core of the religion, and the way in which these are embedded in texts and rituals must be seen as completely beside the point [4] (p. 68). As we will see below, it is precisely through participation in the ‘beside the point’-aspects of religion that religion ‘happens’. Rituals are performative actions; they create religion through the medium of re-presentation. At the moment they speak about God, God exists—in the ritual of prayer or in the sacrament. Having stated this, De Boer is of the opinion that it is not necessary to answer the question about the existence of God [4] (p. 38).

For a different approach to the question of a space for religion without God, I take as a source of inspiration the Japanese concept of religion ‘*nihonkyō*’, depicted as 日本教.

In this concept, the introduction of children and adolescents into the world is symbolised. Starting at the left side, the first character depicts the sun and refers to the warmth that is the source of all life on earth. This character might also refer to the inspiration that moves people and provides them with intuitive associations regarding ‘the good life’. At the same time, such inspiration motivates

them in their daily actions in their pursuit of ‘the good life’, according to their own interpretation and context-related understanding, which is possibly—hopefully—verbally communicated and shared in a community of believing individuals. Human beings balance between verbal expression and silence. The second character depicts a tree. Human beings live under the sun and on the earth. Like a tree that is undeniably rooted in the earth, human beings live in an undeniable and unbreakable relationship with the world they inhabit. This rootedness displays similarities with our incontestable relationship with ‘the other’ and is linked to an attitude of stewardship and responsibility vis-à-vis the world, the contexts in which human beings live, and the people with whom we live together. The third character is in fact a combination of three characters and refers to the interrelated activities of teaching and learning, the child as the subject of—and as subjected to—both of these processes, and the recurrent activities to familiarise the child with knowledge about the world. This can be interpreted as an introduction of the younger generation into the world and as enculturation in their societal context. This kind of transmitted knowledge is needed as a starting point for the beginning of something new—in accordance with the child’s own authentic construction of ‘the good life’. I am well aware of the negative connotations that can accompany ‘*nihonkyō*’, such as indoctrination into the negative features of the collective Japanese mind (e.g., nationalism and populism) (personal and e-mail communication with Professor Jun Fukaya, [5,6]). Nevertheless, positive connotations regarding the inspirational power of religion, the contextualised relationship with ‘the other’, and the need for teaching and learning can also be interpreted from this concept. It is the inspirational power of religion and spirituality that Taylor turns to at the end of his voluminous work *A Secular Age* [7].

The End of Religion as a ‘Dull Habit’

At the end of *A Secular Age*, Taylor reaches the conclusion that the current definition of secularisation as an ongoing historicist process—a subtraction in which scientific knowledge will push out religion—will lose its convictional power in the near future. In the heart of modernity, according to Taylor, the longing for transcendence and spirituality will regain its strength recognising ‘that what is really of value for people, gets away from any computability and human autonomy’ [7] (p. 31).

Taylor articulates that people’s spiritual needs have not diminished in recent times, and they will find new expressions after the implosion of established religious traditions. Not only new expressions but also a new language, as demonstrated by Vaclav Havel, who is extensively quoted at the end of Taylor’s *A Secular Age*:

‘Again, I call to mind that distant moment in [the prison at] Hermanice when on a hot, cloudless summer day, I sat on a pile of rusty iron and gazed into the crown of an enormous tree that stretched, with dignified repose, up and over all the fences, wires, bars and watchtowers that separated me from it. As I watched the imperceptible trembling of its leaves against an endless sky, I was overcome by a sensation that is difficult to describe: all at once, I seemed to rise above all the coordinates of my momentary existence in the world into a kind of state outside time in which all the beautiful things I have ever seen and experienced existed in a total ‘co-present’; I felt a sense of reconciliation, indeed of an almost gentle assent to the inevitable course of events as revealed to me now, and this combined with a carefree determination to face what had to be faced. A profound amazement at the sovereignty of Being became a dizzy sensation of tumbling endlessly into the abyss of its mystery; an unbounded joy at being alive, at having been given the chance to live through all I have lived through, and at the fact that everything has a deep and obvious meaning—this joy formed a strange alliance in me with a vague horror at the inapprehensibility and unattainability of everything I was so close to in that moment, standing at the very ‘edge of the infinite’; I was flooded with a sense of ultimate happiness and harmony with the world and with myself, with that moment, with all the moments I could call up, and with everything invisible that lies behind it and has meaning. I would even say that I was somehow ‘struck by love’, though I don’t know precisely for whom or what’ [7] (pp. 728–729).

In light of Vaclav Havel's stammering sentences, one can almost do nothing else but conclude that it is better to remain silent about what seems to be inexpressible in words. However, to give voice to all our experiences we, as human beings, have nothing else at our disposal besides words. In order to share our deepest feelings and experiences relating to God or whatever we consider to be the divine, we must make an effort to improve our literacy—both verbal and nonverbal—regarding the longing for the transcendent as an undeniable human quality.

A religious community is not only the result of the existence of a religious tradition. At the same time, it is the presence of 'the other(s)'—either in person or within the communal framework of materialised religion(s)—that constitutes religion in its literal meaning of a response to the deep human need for belonging and community [3] (p. 37). In addition to religion's relationship with the human need for community, religion is in need of 'a minimum of words; there is *something* people have faith in, *something* people hope for'. 'Experiences do not get any content when nothing can be said about them' [3] (p. 39). 'All experiences require a certain vocabulary' [3] (p. 40)—a vocabulary that is brought together in traditional narratives. Narratives establish a relationship with the past and offer a point of orientation for the future. Narratives enable human beings to identify with their protagonists who live through conflicts and dilemmas that we ourselves—as modern-day individuals—experience in our own lives, in our own contexts. They offer age-old—yet at the same time refreshingly new—perspectives on our own situations. Collectively listening to narratives or jointly re-enacting them creates a feeling of togetherness and belonging [8] (p. 41); (see also Agten in this volume). The protagonists in traditional mythical narratives show an open attitude towards transcendence; this 'sense of ultimate happiness and harmony with the world and with [ourselves]... 'struck by love', though [we] don't know precisely for whom or what' is something we humans have faith in.

'Something'

This *something* for which our vocabulary is inadequate and insufficient, and which transcends usual daily affairs, is central to the posthumously published work of the physicist and theologian Geurt Oosterwegel (1933–2012). Oosterwegel takes as his starting point that 'in the history of European culture the human ability to position oneself as distinct from reality', i.e., the competency to transcend, was first thematised by Plato (427–347 BC), Aristotle (394–322 BC), and their predecessors [9] (p. 7). By consequence, human beings, unlike animals, have an indirect relationship with the reality of which they are part of. In a sense, this indirect relationship can be seen as a form of detachedness of the world they live in, in order to gain a greater access to this reality. Following Oosterwegel's line of thought, humans are elements of the natural world but not entirely determined by the laws of this natural world, which results in an eccentric perspective and a search for the meaning of what is encountered in the world. The human condition of being an inseparable part of the world and of simultaneously having the ability to take a meta-perspective on one's own position in that world (a so-called 'dual foundation') results in an 'I—an antipodal point—that is aware of its own body and unique being in the world. This antipodal 'I' transcends the aspect of being just an element of the natural world. This transcending of the world and the reflection of 'I' on 'the world—including 'I'' and the interrelationship of 'I' with 'others' constitutes the 'art of living together'; an art that is founded on 'I', which is designated as a 'soul' (Plessner, in [9] (p. 101)). Inherent to this transcendence of the 'soul' is an openness to 'the other' and 'otherness', coined by Oosterwegel as 'receptivity' and 'responsiveness' [9] (p. 102). This other-directedness is related to being of service to others and to the world in which we live together. For this orientation towards 'the other', Oosterwegel coins the concept of 'kenotic subjectivity', described as the ability to open up, be receptive, and put aside everything else in order to make a great effort to respond to any appealing task that crosses your path [9] (p. 210).

Communication in Plurality

An important question that has so far remained untouched is how we can communicate about what we do not seem to be able to find the right words for—our deepest feelings and experiences

relating to God or whatever we consider to be the divine. Talking about the relevance of religion in contemporary education, we inevitably need to address the topic of religious literacy, understood in a minimal way as having developed the required attitude and having the necessary language at one's disposal to enter into an inter (religious and secular) worldview dialogue. Even when speaking of a lack of religious literacy and the failures of students, Jäggle [10] states that, although they lack knowledge of religious concepts, 'young people do have the language to speak about God and to speak to God' [10] (p. 212). Jäggle refers to the expressive power of the language of students in relation to their sensitivity to disruptive moments of misery and suffering, which often result in a quest for meaning and possibly a quest for God. Such moments facilitate the integration of God into their lives, while at the same time God remains hidden in transcendency. For Jäggle, the challenge of religious education lies in exploring the expressive language of young people in order to discover, if possible, in their subjective spoken language, an updated way of expressing our deepest feelings and experiences relating to whatever we consider to be the divine.

Dialogicality—Second Language Acquisition

Receptivity and responsiveness (on behalf of the students) and responsibility (on behalf of the educators) are core concepts that relate to the question of the relevance of religion today and in particular—linked to the theme of this Special Issue—to the relevance of religion in contemporary education. Educators bear responsibility for the accessibility of the world, as Arendt states [11]. Responsiveness to their teachers based on trust is preconditional on the part of the students to give themselves over to the facilitating leadership of their teachers.

By linking up with the actual and informal language of young people, the language of inter-worldview dialogue can be taught to students as a second language, in addition to the everyday informal conversational terms and abbreviations that they acquire. This process must take into account the three-fold aspects of second language acquisition—language 'of' learning, language 'for' learning, and language 'through' learning [12] (pp. 257–258). The first aspect focuses on the acquisition of knowledge about religious concepts, such as 'prayer' and 'fasting'; the second aspect emphasises the language needed to accomplish a particular task, like preparing for a church service; and the third aspect actually develops through active participation, for example, by attending religious rituals. Empowering students in the world of plural sacred canopies, imagining future ways of taking responsibility for the world in which we live together, and—through dialogue—developing an understanding for 'the other' in spite of different—or even conflicting—life orientations is what I see as the main tasks for scholars studying education and religion today.

“... That's Where the Light Gets in”

The cracks in the sacred canopy compel creativity from all educators involved to move away from traditional confessional religious education and its methods of teaching religion. According to Leonard Cohen, 'there is a crack in everything that you can put together: physical objects, mental objects, constructions of any kind. But that's where the light gets in.' We have to follow the light and move in the direction of... of what? In the direction of the unknown future, while being receptive to the wisdom that comes to us from the past from a plurality of religious and secular worldview traditions and their different ways of responding to existential questions. We have to move, since 'those who won't move, won't be able to throw off their chains' [13] (pp. 44–47).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Vroom, H. *Religie als ziel van cultuur. Religieus pluralisme als uitdaging* [Religion as the Soul of Culture. Religious Pluralism as Challenge]; Meinema: Zoetermeer, The Netherlands, 1996.
2. James, W. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; Collier MacMillan Publishers: London, UK, 1961.
3. Taylor, C. *Wat betekent religie vandaag?* [What Is the Meaning of Religion Today?]; Klement: Kampen, The Netherlands, 2003.
4. De Boer, T.; Groot, G. *Religie zonder God. Een dialoog* [Religion Without God. A Dialogue]; Uitgeverij Sijbolet: Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2013.
5. Fukaya, N. 'Nihonkyo'. Presented at the ISREV XXI Conference, 'Comparative Perspectives and Contextual Challenges in Religious and Values Education', FAU University, Nuremberg, Germany, 29 July–3 August 2018.
6. Fukaya, N. 'Further Clarification of the Concept of Nihonkyo', email, 18 April 2019.
7. Taylor, C. *A Secular Age*; The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA; London, UK, 2007.
8. Van der Lans, J. *Religie ervaren. Godsdienspsychologische opstellen* [Experiencing Religion. Essays in Psychology of Religion]; Tilburg: KSGV, The Netherlands, 2006.
9. Oosterwegel, G. *Christelijk geloven in een seculiere wereld. Over de relevantie van het geloof voor de hedendaagse technologische maatschappij* [Christian Faith in a Secular World. On the Relevance of Religious Belief in the Contemporary Technological Society]; Eburon: Delft, The Netherlands, 2015.
10. Jäggle, M. 'Zur Funktion religiöser Bildung in der postsäkularen Gesellschaft' [On the Function of Religious Education in the Post-Secular Society]. In *Religiöse Rede in postsäkularen Gesellschaften*; Rose, M., Wermke, M., Eds.; Evangelische Verlagsanstalt: Leipzig, Germany, 2016; pp. 203–215.
11. Arendt, H. The Crisis in Education. In *Between Past and Future*; Penguin Putnam Inc.: Berkley, CA, USA, 1954.
12. Ter Avest, I. Entwicklung der religiösen Kompetenz. Einde Art von Fremdsprachenunterricht [Development of Religious Competency. A Type of Second Language Acquisition]. In *Religiöse Rede in postsäkularen Gesellschaften*; Rose, M., Wermke, M., Eds.; Evangelische Verlagsanstalt: Leipzig, Germany, 2016; pp. 255–262.
13. Hermsen, J.; Ottjes, B. 'Monter ondanks alles'; honderd jaar Rosa Luxemburg ['Cheerful in Spite of Everything'; One Hundred Year Rosa Luxemburg]. *De Groene Amsterdammer* **2019**, *143*, 44–47.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).