

## A Transformative Pedagogy for Classrooms with Pluralistic Worldviews

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Reading Suzanne Rosenblith and Benjamin Bindewald's relevant and sympathetic contribution and having been part of the large REDCo-project (*Religion in Education: A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries*) funded by the European Commission and including eight rather different European countries (Russia, Estonia, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, and Spain),<sup>1</sup> I am strongly aware of the contextuality of the debates on common, state, or public schools. Rosenblith and Bindewald are strongly embedded in the U.S. context with its own past and present regarding the political system and the relation of school and religion. Further, the religious context is characterized by particular differences with an eye to the religious communities (liberal, orthodox, and fundamentalist, for example) present in a state, town, or city and their (relative) impacts and uses of power.

An important component of the contextuality is the way in which the principle of the separation of church and state (or institutionalized religious or worldview communities) is articulated, and whether such a separation by definition includes a separation of state and religion/worldview as such. Also crucial is how the place of religion and worldview is dealt with in or excluded from the private, social, and public spheres.<sup>2</sup>

Following such major contemporary thinkers as Jürgen Habermas, Hans Joas, and Charles Taylor,<sup>3</sup> it is clear that religion has been more persistent than was expected on the basis of the developments during the last decades of the twentieth century even in the highly secularized countries of Western Europe, such as the Netherlands. It is my contention that the simplistic opposition of religion and reason, which we often see in both religious fundamentalists and secular fundamentalists who take exclusivist stances based on religion or reason, respectively, is unfruitful from an individual as well as a societal and community point of view. Today the reciprocal relations of religion/worldview and reason should be challenged in processes of constructive dialogue and encounter. In accordance with this, I argue for interreligious citizenship education in all denominational and public schools.<sup>4</sup>

The authors point in the same direction, and their stance toward religious education in a liberal, pluralist, democratic state is clearly stated elsewhere by Rosenblith. Religion should be taken seriously in public schools and given "a prominent place in the curriculum, but in such a way that religion fits in with and is not excluded from important public conversations about the good."<sup>5</sup> Realizing a robust pluralism that includes religion in public schools means "providing students with opportunities to learn about different religious traditions as well as providing them with opportunities to ask questions and critically examine others' belief and unbelief."<sup>6</sup>

I have read Rosenblith and Bindewald's current contribution as a follow up to that stance, focusing here particularly on the role of the teacher. They provide three principles that might be helpful to teachers to support their epistemological and ethical duties for a balanced approach when dealing with religion(s) broadly speaking, and with the different and sometimes controversial convictions, stances, and arguments the students express or bring to the fore in respect to their religious or worldview commitments in pluralistic classrooms of public schools. These principles are:

- *The principle of authentic respect*, by which the teacher gives full space to all different and controversial claims and assertions made by students and grants them the presumption of worth;
- *The principle of potential harm*, by which the teacher should consider the degree to which a truth claim might harm other students' worldview stances and act accordingly — this principle can be seen as a pedagogical and ethical restriction used by the teacher regarding the first principle;
- *The principle of adequate justification*, by which all claims should be justified appropriately even if the likelihood of potential harm is zero or negligible. This justification is especially pressing in the case of potential harm and the student is then asked "to provide public evidence to support the veracity of this claim."

Although I am very sympathetic to the approach of offering adequate principles to teachers for dealing with religion(s) and worldview(s) in the classroom without hiding away controversial convictions, stances, and arguments the students express, I still notice *a certain subordination of religion to reason*. I see this explicitly formulated in the final demand to justify all religious claims and statements in terms of epistemological underpinning even if they are harmless, and to provide public evidence. I am not convinced that the statements, "Accepting Jesus as one's savior is the only way to salvation" or "God appeared to me last night and told me to..." can be adequately characterized as factual truth claims or as perceptual claims. I would coin them, from a theology of religions perspective, as religious truth claims, and they might have an exclusivist/absolutist, inclusivist or pluralist underpinning.<sup>7</sup>

Following the above-stated view that *the reciprocal relations of religion/worldview and reason* should be challenged in processes of constructive dialogue and encounter, my approach would be a bit different. In light of the fallible results of the natural and social and human sciences, students should be invited and supported by the teacher to relate particular religious/worldview claims to scientific considerations, without suggesting that the sciences should have the final word. In this way, religious/worldview commitments and convictions can be related to the domain of facticity (warranted assertabilities of the sciences), the domain of the normative (leading values and norms), and the domain of personal authenticity (self-articulation). From a teaching perspective, in addressing classroom differences in religions and worldviews (even sub-denominational religious differences), it is my experience that discussion along the lines of the normative domain and the domain

of personal authenticity is quite often far more convincing than just factual data. The principles the authors offer can then adequately be used heuristically, provided that these principles will be given equal status.

Finally I will explicitly formulate here the pedagogical aim of dealing with religion/worldviews in the classroom. The transformative pedagogy regarding religious/worldview education that I have outlined elsewhere — with Willem Wardekker and Gert Biesta, for example — aims at the religious/worldview identity formation of the student. In this pedagogy, the subject-matter, “the stuff,” brought in by the teachers but also embodied by their peers, should invite students to take responsibility for their religious self-formation, their self-actualization both from an individual as well from a societal/social perspective — though not with the intention to lead them to particular religious/worldview communities. I add here a Derridean, deconstructive stance in which religious/worldview education never solely deals with the presentation of knowledge or facts, nor functions as a technology. It is about creating opportunities for students to respond, to assume a stance, positively or negatively, toward religious practices, doctrines, narratives, traditions, and visions. And teachers may feel responsible to create also in public school classrooms such opportunities for students to open up.<sup>8</sup>

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1. See Robert Jackson, Siebren Miedema, Wolfram Weisse, Jean-Paul Willaime, eds., *Religion and Education in Europe: Developments, Contexts and Debates* (Münster: Waxmann, 2007).

2. Siebren Miedema, “Public, Social, and Individual Perspectives on Religious Education: Voices from the Past and the Present,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 25, no. 1/2 (2006): 111–127.

3. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008); Hans Joas, *Do We Need Religion? On the Experience of Self-Transcendence* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008); and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

4. Siebren Miedema and Ina ter Avest, “In the Flow to Maximal Interreligious Citizenship Education,” *Religious Education* 106, no. 4 (2011): 410–425.

5. Suzanne Rosenblith, “Religious Education in a Liberal, Pluralist, Democratic State,” *Religious Education* 103, no. 5 (2008): 507.

6. *Ibid.*, 510.

7. Willem L. Wardekker and Siebren Miedema, “Denominational School Identity and the Formation of Personal Identity,” *Religious Education* 96, no. 1 (2001): 36–48.

8. Siebren Miedema and Gert Biesta, “Jacques Derrida’s Religion With/Out Religion and the Im/Possibility of Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 99, no. 1 (2004): 23–37.