

To Have a Right to a Brave and Safe Space

An Interview with Prof. Bert Roebben

František Štěch (interviewer)

Hubertus Roebben (interviewee)

František Štěch (henceforth **FŠ**): Dear Professor, dear Bert, we have been friends for more than a decade now, so I will call you Bert as I am used to. I hope readers of the Theology and Philosophy of Education (TAPE) journal will understand. First, let me thank you, that you kindly agreed to give this interview for an emerging international journal providing a platform for theologians as well as philosophers who are interested in education (including self-education) to share their research. In relation to that, my first question is: “What do you think, is there a space for such a journal in contemporary European academia?”

Bert Roebben (henceforth **BR**): There is a long intellectual tradition in Europe that reflects on the purpose and conditions of education. The German term “Bildung” originated precisely in this enlightened tradition and points to the importance of moral integrity and agency in the formation of the person. Enlightenment philosophers including Jan Amos Comenius of the Czech Republic pointed to the simultaneously unique responsibility of the individual to become somebody and the universal role of communities as a connection between people. The philosophical aspects of this “project”, to be realized again in these complex times, are covered in journals such as “Philosophy of Education”. The theological aspects have been much less covered until now. The question is: What is the “semantic potential” (Jürgen Habermas) of religious traditions that can shed new light on this project and how can this be made intelligible in a philosophical and educational perspective. Lots of interesting work to be done, isn’t it?

FŠ: You are a professor of religious education. Where do you see the most relevant points(s) of such a discipline for contemporary church and perhaps also for contemporary society?

BR: My focus is indeed on the religious dimension of education, on learning processes that explore how existential questions of (young) people refer from themselves to perspectives, which are contingent and open for transcendent interpretation. Relying on transcendence is a specific feature of religion. Also, in non-religious worldviews people struggle with the question of an “ultimate perspective” of the complex realities they live in (climate crisis, pandemic, war, etc.). I believe that future generations have a right to a “brave and safe space” where such questions may be asked in all their vulnerability and where answers are sought together. Local

differences in Europe make this topic be addressed in the public realm of school and/or in the intimacy of the faith community.

FŠ: According to my knowledge, you are truly a global academic, with experience of working in Europe, Africa, United states... if you can compare, where do you see the largest potential for development in your discipline. What is the next “hot spot” for religious education?

BR: We have long thought that the centre of the world and the point of reference for (research in) education was to be found in Europe. And yes, until recently a lot of funding could be released for cartographic work in religious education in schools in Europe (such as the REL-EDU project in Vienna) and for interreligious learning processes in these schools (such as the REDCo project in Hamburg). The focus however is now slowly but surely moving to the Global South. New projects arise in the world of Islamic education and human rights development, in post-colonial approaches to religion and education, and in projects on social justice and religious diversity. In the Global South religions are still a powerful tool for social change and development. Academic educational settings are developed to support these processes. The Faculty of Theology of Stellenbosch University for instance is a real African hub for research and education in ethics and spirituality, based on the local knowledge of people. I truly believe in the new inter-contextual learning process between communities worldwide, partly supported by digital media, partly in real presence.

FŠ: What do you think, what can be the most important contribution of theology and philosophy to education and vice versa? What could inspire theologians and philosophers from the realm of education?

BR: Theology can offer broad hermeneutical horizons with interesting performative resources and intellectual patterns of thought to the field of education. The Scottish practical theologian Heather Walton refers to *poesis* and *phronesis* as sources of public theology. The task of philosophy is to remind us of the questions to which religions try to give reasonable answers, according to Jewish philosopher of religion Abraham Joshua Heschel. Education then helps us put our feet back on the ground, look at everyday reality and consider how questions and answers can be made practical. These three – theology, philosophy, education – should be in dialogue with each other all the time. In that respect, the TAPE journal comes just in time!

FŠ: I know that besides you being a theologian and professor of RE, you are also a public figure in your communities. How do you combine your professional life with your public activities? Do you find these two “worlds” mutually inspiring?

BR: For me, practice and theory are closely linked. What I teach my students, I must also be able to verify in reality outside the aula. So, some time ago I stood in front of the classroom in

an elementary school as a “teacher educator in residence”. I myself preside regularly in the liturgy of our home parish. I am also interested in the connection of literature and theology, art and theology, performance and theology, mysticism and theology. If I have the opportunity to engage in these cross-connections, I will not miss it. And during the corona pandemic I went on a part pilgrimage on the Camino – 600 kilometres from my hometown Leuven to Vézelay in France – four weeks of experiencing the “real stuff” of the theologian: moments of perseverance, vulnerability, storytelling and encounters with fellow pilgrims and God.

FŠ: And now, I would like to ask maybe something more difficult. Is the current state of the Catholic Church’s relationship to education affected by the traumas that have been caused in the context of education and what way out lies before us?

BR: Education has everything to do with trust. Opening oneself to new insights, is based on a relationship of trust: of the child to the educator, of the student to the teacher, of young people and adults among themselves in peer processes. When this trust is betrayed or shaken, when the most intimate aspects of the trust relationship (such as faith and sexuality) are violated by abuses of power, deep wounds are inflicted, wounds that prove irreparable. In response, financial and moral reparations are needed, of course, but also much more than that. Openness, transparency and communication in education are vital. I personally value the virtue of courtesy, which has an important place in the lessons of everyday life (including in social media, for example). This virtue can help children and youth make a start with what is of value on their way to adulthood.

FŠ: Bert, I have the last question. What would you wish for the TAPE journal and what would be your message to the TAPE readers?

BR: Let me tell you a short story. My first experiences as a European religious educator were situated exactly in the Czech Republic! In the early nineties I was working on my dissertation on moral education. On that occasion I met in Belgium Dr Věra Bokorová who invited me as an international guest at a conference of the Union of Christian Pedagogues entitled “Christian Values and the Development of Man” in Kroměříž (Czech Republic) in the summer of 1992. I felt honoured and went there. The journey was by bike. With three friends, we went from Leuven in Belgium to Prague, 1000 kilometres in 10 days, from West to East, against all the contour lines in the Central-European landscape. I literally felt Europe in my calves. In Prague my friends returned home and I went deeper inland by train, from Bohemia to Moravia, to Kroměříž. I turned out to be the only foreigner at the congress. I was deeply impressed by the stories of the participants, all academics and teachers, who had lived underground during the time of communism and had to develop their philosophy, theology and pedagogy in secret. I learned with deep respect from them how life as a whole can be a pilgrimage. This turned out to be the root metaphor for me in understanding education, philosophy and theology. I wish

the TAPE journal such rich encounters when being “on the road” of theology and philosophy of education in Europe.

FŠ: Thank you very much for your answers!

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