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I recently visited with an educational philosopher at one of North America’s Ivy League schools. Lying open on the professor’s table was Bert Roebben’s latest book which maintains that exploring the insights of “the religious phenomenon” (26) is an educational right belonging to “every child” (17) and more, to “every human being” (43). Religious education has bold hopes! I wondered how this inclusive plea would be received in a North American context, especially given that Roebben is particularly concerned that theology (not the more neutral religious studies) contribute to the life of schools. Yet, he is fully aware that religious belief and identity have a “precarious” position in modern society: “Theology seems to be dangerous when it enters the school yard!” (87).

Unifying these essays is the application of Tillich’s concept of “ultimate concern” to the practice of religious education (7, 55, 89, 90, 125, etc.). This adds even further scope to Roebben’s theology-for-all vision—and yet the result is no ultimatum. Instead of a totalizing assertion of religious authority, Roebben uses the idea of ultimate concern as a way of emancipating theological language from academic or ecclesiastical control. In a tone similar to another Belgian theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, Roebben envisions religious education in a world where there is no religious a priori. To be precise, not simply religious education “in” such a world, but “with” this world. “Theology is not the privilege of academic theologians or church ministers, but lies in the hands of every person who seriously tries to understand his/her attachment to ‘ultimate concerns’” (90). This inclusive perspective is applied to the practice of religious education through a model of teaching that emphasizes interreligious learning, children’s theology, “pedagogical slowification” (79), and openness to mystery.

In his popular 2013 book Seeking Sense in the City, Roebben wrote of a kenotic Christ who “in his listening he becomes authoritative...” The present volume reaffirms the Christological basis of Roebben’s ideas; this is especially evident in his appeal to biblical stories and wisdom traditions as guideposts in the search for ultimate answers. In this way, Roebben’s proposal has similarity to that of twentieth-century Christian educator James D. Smart who lamented the “strange silence of the Bible in the Church.” Roebben’s important contribution is...
(like Smart) in affirming the importance of traditional content for teaching-learning processes, while (unlike Smart) making no presumptions about the existence of an ecclesiastically-tidy space for such teaching. The author’s belief that the twenty-first century is both post-Christendom and post-secular is clear: he proposes to “de-congeal” (35, 109) scriptural tradition so its insights become liquid, flowing into the forgotten spiritual crevices of postmodern life. In pedagogical terms, this means that there can be no assumption that students have faith or even a theistic worldview. As in an earlier era the teacher expresses authority, but now authority is expressed not through didactical domination but through attending, accompanying, listening. There is a pragmatic acknowledgement that religious pedagogics formed in a different time are no longer effective. “Catechesis after all presupposes pre-catechesis which in its turn presumes religious socialization. And this is no longer available.... Are schools courageous enough to critique their overemphasis on didactical organization ‘in religiosis’?” (34).

An image that appears throughout the book is of a “table of learning” spread with “soul food.” This metaphor is realized through Roebben’s writing itself; the liberality the author proposes as a concept is reinforced through the author’s generous style. Many chairs are brought to his table; lots of conversations are started. He is just as likely to quote a Buber or a Dewey as he is to cite the work of his DoktorandInnen. The book is “practical”—it appears in Peeters’ noted Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs series—in that it arises from the author’s own career as a teacher and teacher of teachers. Roebben is not serving any dishes he has not cooked himself. A highlight is the way the author’s theological ideas are explained through pedagogical examples; several tables (rather appropriately) chart his soulish ideas.

A nagging issue Roebben acknowledges is the international fragmentation of religious education. The book arises out of his own scholarship in the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium, but he notes that religious education policies in other European countries (where approaches range from mono-religious curriculum and catechetical/denominational instruction to multi-faith education and the absence of religion from schools) are quite different. This diversity is writ one-hundred times larger when moving beyond Europe, and the institutional variation of religious education internationally is an issue which the guild of religious education must struggle if it aspires to become a globally-inclusive discourse. Two ways Roebben addresses this are (a) in speaking of religious education as a human right and (b) in speaking of religious pedagogics in inter-religious terms. Undergirding both moves is the idea that religious education should give increased attention to discovering the spiritual potential of any act of learning, whether sanctioned by religious officials or not. Religious education, as a discipline, may achieve international scope through the vague but seemingly ubiqui-
tous language of “spirituality.” This concept comes to the surface in Roebben’s description of Spiritual Learning Communities. In these communities, religious authority is liquified but not evaporated. A spiritual disposition commits persons to discerning the deepest mystery of their identities (whether religious or not) through an educational process open to learning from difference. The theological vocation is thus not to give up God-talk, but to add to such talk God-listening. A spiritual learning community “gives human beings the chance to articulate in a denomination- and religion-transcending way the spiritual dimension of living-together-in-diversity and to find new meaning in their common approach to the concerns of a post-secular society. Particular belief systems should not be excluded from this approach but can rather be included. They can provide it with new motivating fuel” (71).

Roebben’s table is big; its round space accommodates a wide range of diners—children, atheists, poets, pragmatists, rock musicians, true believers, Ivy Leaguers. *Theology Made in Dignity* listens to all their voices. Can this conversation about the spiritual future of religious education extend beyond Western Europe? We can only hope.