A Review of “Seeking Sense in the City: European Perspectives on Religious Education”
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In this recently published collection, Bert Roebben draws on the metaphor of “city” to present his perspectives on the dilemmas of religious education with young people in the shifting and complex currents of postmodern Western society. As a European, he seeks to address these dilemmas for that context and simultaneously to offer his insights, and those of other significant European religious education scholars, to a broader English-speaking audience. That audience includes school teachers, youth and young adult ministers, scholars, church leaders, and all Christians concerned with the question framed decades ago by John Westerhoff, “Will our children have faith?” (1976).

The book’s essays were originally published during 1994–2009, and several were revised for the collection. Roebben has arranged them into three major sections: Part I focuses on “Education, Religion, and Values,” where the challenges of moral education and religious education in postmodernity are laid out; Part II emphasizes the school setting (especially in Germany, Flanders, and the Netherlands) and outlines religious education approaches for secondary teachers in the classroom and for their own professional formation; and Part III looks at church-sponsored youth and young adult ministry in the “city.”

Several important presumptions ground the author’s approach to religious education with young people. One concerns this developmental phase and its range: Roebben states that while “young adult” formerly connoted ages sixteen through twenty-six, it has recently become a longer and more indeterminate period between childhood and adulthood. In this phase, young people become aware of and participate in the fragmentation and flux of the contemporary world. Here they sample various ways of being a self, greatly influenced by the forces of market and media and yet, in Roebben’s expression, “longing for the homeland”—seeking coherence, meaning and depth for their life projects (191).

With the postmodern collapse of “master narratives” and the prevalence of bewildering cultural and religious diversity, social
institutions that once offered common faith traditions as resources for self-integration have lost or abandoned their ability to do so. The author asserts that virtually no religious socialization occurs in the home anymore and that mainstream (both Catholic and Protestant) churches have greatly declined in social influence. Thus, for schools and congregations to work from the model of “correlation didactics” widely used in the 1970s and 1980s is no longer valid, since this model presumed both a “pre-catechetical” faith commitment and sufficient grounding in the foundational religious narratives to bring into correlative dialogue with one’s experiences and life issues.

Roebben outlines the elements of more promising religious education responses in this radically changed, and changing, situation. Throughout the book he draws on several vivid metaphors to illustrate what is needed. Perhaps the most important is “playground,” connoting a realm where young people can discover and relate freely to sources of meaning as they make their way in the “city.” Rather than a setting for either indoctrination or relativism, the playground becomes an educational space in which young people can pick up and manipulate the fragmentary remains of major faith narratives, discovering meaning in the company of supportive and religiously committed adults. Thus in Part I, the least explicitly “religious” section, Roebben advocates an approach to moral education that offers adolescent students a “mental playground” in which they can be invited to consider how they make moral decisions based on their shared reality as humans, later moving to more explicit engagement with religious traditions as potential resources for developing ethical stances.

Then, in addressing religious education in the secondary school and youth and young adult ministry (with particular focus on Roman Catholic entities), Roebben’s “spiritual playground” is metaphorically situated in the “narthex” of the church building, a liminal setting where pilgrims can gather in the midst of their journey. “In order to see more clearly one’s life destination, the religious educator leads the young person on a quest within the narthex, the passageway between outside and inside, between already and not yet, between longing and perspective” (16). We cannot presume that the pilgrimage will necessarily culminate in entry into the church’s “sacred” space, but the narthex allows young people an opportunity for spiritual exploration that can foster transformation. Roebben describes in chapter 11 a creative design for a young adult summer camp in which the participants actually walked through the Belgian countryside as pilgrims, stopping into old churches to experience refreshment and reflection in the “in between.”
Here and elsewhere, Roebben’s insightful incorporation of an eschatological perspective serves his project well. Young people’s seeming aimlessness in their “play,” their lack of clarity regarding a destination, can foster moments of educational kairos in which they as pilgrims know the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” and perceive divine presence there, however unmoored from traditional modes of religious socialization.

Especially striking and sobering for me is Roebben’s metaphor of past religious and cultural master narratives as resembling the Titanic—hitting the iceberg of postmodernity and sinking into an ocean of pluralism. As church religious educators sit in their lifeboats and watch the scenario unfold, we can speak in the language of “disaster” or of “emergence.” In the former, we watch and mourn for the shattered glory of the ocean liner; in the latter, we float watchfully amid the wreckage, looking for fragments to gather and retain. Roebben advocates the second approach as a better way to reach young people who never knew the pre-iceberg Titanic. For example, he describes the use of some key biblical fragments, such as the narrative of Moses’ calling and vocation, as providing a “mental detour” that may transform the young person’s self-storying in a new “faith–life” correlation.

The collection provides a rich and provocative glimpse of European perspectives in religious education that will spark lively conversation among North American religious educators and practical theologians. As I read it I found myself considering how I teach theological anthropology to university undergraduates, and found many convergences with Roebben’s approach. Unable to assume religious literacy, I attempt to raise students’ consciousness of their responsibility to formulate meaning for their life projects, develop trust in some source of ultimacy, and act in ways consistent with these. In doing so I introduce them to classic Christian narratives that may offer some modest contribution to this process, and also teach them to be alert to how popular culture appropriates these narratives and adapts them for entertainment and commercial gain. Thus there is the possibility for what Roebben calls “meta-noetic” engagement with the religious stories: proceeding from the context of one’s own biography (meta), people engage in critical analysis (noetic) and consider reappropriation.

However, North American readers whose major focus is religious education in faith communities will have to decide for themselves how closely the religiously barren social landscape of postmodernity, and lack of religious socialization, that Roebben assumes for his young people corresponds to their own observations. If they agree, they must also assess the author’s presumption that, absent strong faith
formation in the home and culture, meaningful religious education can take place in church schools and ministry programs. Further, they will need to find ways to sustain themselves in their vocation, in the face of massive cultural forces that lay dominant claim to their young people’s attention. And their challenge may well be compounded by their denominational affiliations. Roebben would have them proceed with the premise that meaningful religious education will be unavoidably fragmented as it draws on the “wreckage” of faith traditions that have been even further eroded by the turbulent waves of postmodernity. Consequently, they will likely need to take on a prophetic role within their own church structures, some of which are openly committed to acontextual and doctrinaire approaches to religious education.

A few features of the book work against ready understanding and appropriation. There is some awkwardness in English expression (although outweighed by Roebben’s more typical eloquence). The compilation of essays from varied publications leads to a fair amount of repetition of key claims across chapters. The writing could also be helpfully augmented by more examples of how Roebben’s approach might actually look—in school curricula, youth ministry activities, and so on—in order to bring his theoretical treatments down to earth.

In the end, however, Roebben’s deep expertise in his field results in a penetrating, highly nuanced presentation that calls religious educators to realistic hopefulness in their work with young people. Roebben is obviously in touch with the yearning of young people for deeper meaning amid their dissatisfaction with both traditional authorities and immensely alluring cultural forces. He challenges churches to risk new vulnerability or else lose this generation completely. “A church who withdraws itself, who doesn’t risk or dare itself to be scorched by the dynamics of the world and its future generations, will lose her correlative power, her vision on how faith and life relate, and on how God wants to exceed himself in this world” (204). He reframes Westerhoff’s question to ask, “Do adults still have faith in their children?” (230). Clearly, Roebben does.

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