

Empowerment
in and through vulnerability –
Religious education for a new Europe

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1. Then (2007, 2016), now (2025) and may-be...



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Learning occurs through exposure to the other-as-oneself, to the stranger. This **exposure** is substantive. Without confrontation, without polishing, the diamond of education cannot sparkle. In order to safeguard my contribution to the world (in the sense of Hannah Arendt), I need to expose myself to otherness and strangeness. This vulnerable exposure should not be understood instrumentally, but existentially. It is not about allowing a little bit of exotic strangeness in order to be better prepared to found or to make up my own story better.

That would mean that we “only [would] ‘need’ others in order to find out and make clear how we are different from them – how my identity is unique – but once this has gotten clear we wouldn’t need others anymore. Our relationship with others would therefore remain instrumental”.

Our uniqueness is precisely lying in the answer that we formulate or better that we live up to in our exposure towards other people. My uniqueness arises when I am asked to respond to the imperative of the other and to take up my **response-ability**. In that specific moment of exposure, I experience my personal answer as a co-human being to another human being.

“Uniqueness, then, ceases to be an ontological notion – it is not about what we possess or are in terms of identity – but becomes an existential notion that has to do with the ways in which we are *exposed* to others, are *singled out* by them” and become ourselves.

[Citations from Gert Biesta 2011, in B. Roebben, *Theology made in dignity. On the precarious role of theology in religious education*, Leuven/Paris, Peeters, 2016, 67-68].

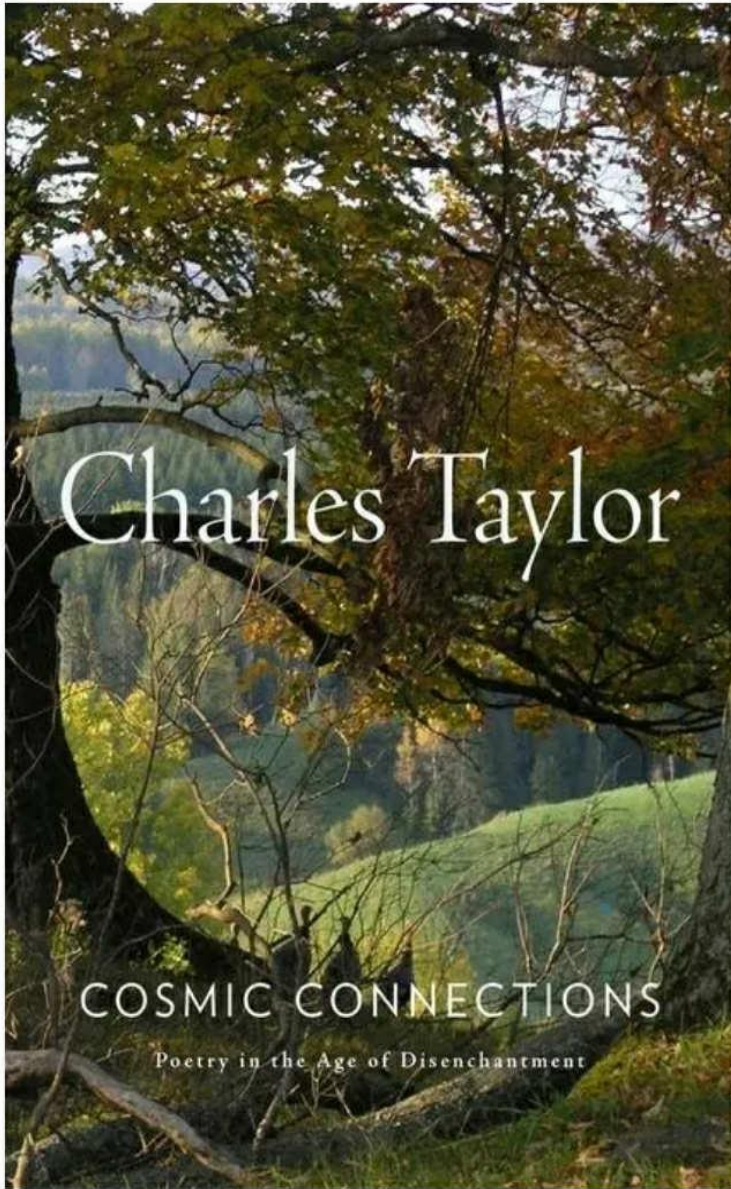
“What can I learn from you if we cannot be different from each other? Why would I learn at all when it does not make a difference where you come from, who you are, and what you stand for? Real educational encounter happens when differences in interpretation occur: You are different from me, your way of acting is strange to me, but I want to know you, you intrigue me. This is where I stand, where do you stand?” (Roebben 2016, 52).

2. Learning in the presence of the other (Roebben 2016, 18)

Learning <i>about</i> religion	Learning <i>from</i> religion	Learning <i>in/through</i> religion
Knowing the other	Respecting the other	Re-defining and re-dignifying myself
Heuristic competence	Communicative competence	Existential competence
Teacher as <i>expert</i>	Teacher as <i>moderator</i>	Teacher as <i>witness</i>

2. Learning in the presence of the other (Roebben 2016, 18)

Learning <i>about</i> religion	Learning <i>from</i> religion	Learning <i>in/through</i> religion
Worldview literacy: a common grammar	Inter-worldview dialogue: encounter between mother tongues	<i>Weltinnenraum</i> (Rilke): my story told in my mother tongue
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According to Charles Taylor in his *Cosmic Connections* (2024), not only a new common (worldview) grammar is needed that connects and engages private mother tongues, but also a new “Dichtung” or “poèsis” is needed within existing mother tongues.

Taylor addresses the question of how to reconnect with what surrounds us, how to undo the “disenchantment” of the world and rediscover the in-between area or “interspace” (the *Weltinnenraum* of Rilke) between what appears and what really is – not from a Cartesian empirical perspective, but from a poetic-intuitive perspective. People have been given the opportunity, on the basis of a transcendental desire that has always been there, to rediscover and deepen this “interspace” again and to do so through language as a condensation (in German: “Dichtung”) of reality, e.g. through music, theater, writing and art.

These deep experiences “have to be drawn out of us by a powerful vision of reality”, and, once expressed, must also be verified in people’s conversation with each other. This requires “social engineering”, true listening to each other and to how others give meaning to their lives as narrative identities, “to lay down the burden of hatred” and thus be set on the road to ethical “fulfillments which our nature as human beings prescribe for us”. Goodness arises where people work on their own “little goodness.” Beauty arises where people work on their own little narratives of life. Truth arises where people share these experiences and together arrive at new sustainable ethical understandings (quotes by Charles Taylor in Roebben 2025a).



Philip de László
"The Storyteller" (1891)
Hungarian National Gallery

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Knowing the other	Respecting the other	Re-defining and re-dignifying myself
Existential ambiguity of texts (Fahimah Ulfat)	Existential questions (Eszter Simon)	Existential resilience (Arniika Kuusisto): gift and/or response?
Heuristic competence	Communicative competence	Existential competence
Teacher as <i>expert</i>	Teacher as <i>moderator</i>	Teacher as <i>witness</i>

3. Empowerment in vulnerability – implications for RE teacher education

Radical existentialism as a point of reference for religious educational leadership today (Roebben 2025a) – which implies:

- learning hard *textwork*
- learning friction and *hermeneutic-irritating* methods
- learning to understand the *question horizon* of reality (Hans-Georg Gadamer)
- learning to be a true storyteller: *this is me, here I am, what do you want me to do?* (one step beyond Martin Heidegger) – the *hineini* of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible
- learning to *experience becoming* (Kurt Vonnegut), doing the unique personal creative storytelling in the *Weltinnenraum*, which cannot be replaced by AI

“We are pregnant with a thought for which we have no image. We are endowed with a song which we cannot utter, with a word we do not know how to spell. Then we open a Psalm, and there is the song and the word. Only then the song within us grows. We pour it into a deed. We fashion it into words, but the song is never exhausted. What we must do is to nurse the song in the recesses of the soul. Over and above all frustrations is a certainty that we are never alone in doing the good.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel, quoted in A. McBride, *Heschel: Religious Educator*, Denville (NJ), Dimension Books, 1973, 124.



revue-educatio.eu (2025a)



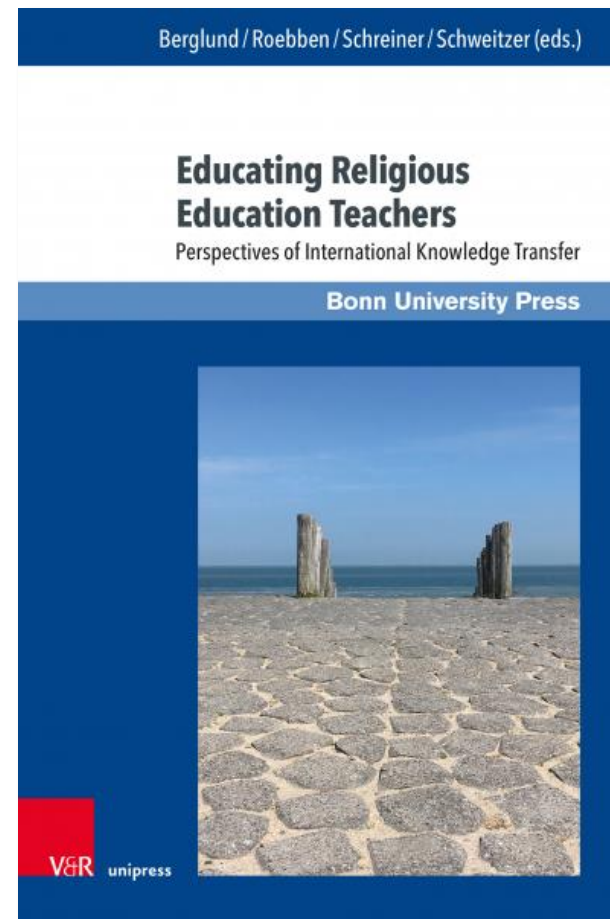
The screenshot shows the homepage of the journal 'Educatio'. At the top, the logo '---educatio' is displayed in a dark red font, with the subtitle 'La revue scientifique de l'éducation chrétienne' below it. A navigation bar contains the links 'ACCUEIL', 'MOTS CLÉS', and 'AUTEURS'. The main content area features the title '“Deus semper maior”' and the subtitle 'Radical existentialism as a point of reference for religious educational leadership in Western Europe'.

---educatio
La revue scientifique de l'éducation chrétienne

ACCUEIL MOTS CLÉS AUTEURS

“Deus semper maior”
Radical existentialism as a point of reference
for religious educational leadership in Western
Europe

vr-elibrary.de (2024)



The book cover has a dark blue background. At the top, the editors' names 'Berglund / Roebben / Schreiner / Schweitzer (eds.)' are listed. The title 'Educating Religious Education Teachers' is prominently displayed in white, with the subtitle 'Perspectives of International Knowledge Transfer' below it. The publisher's name 'Bonn University Press' is at the bottom right. A central photograph shows a stone-paved path leading to two wooden posts on a beach. The 'V&R unipress' logo is in the bottom left corner.

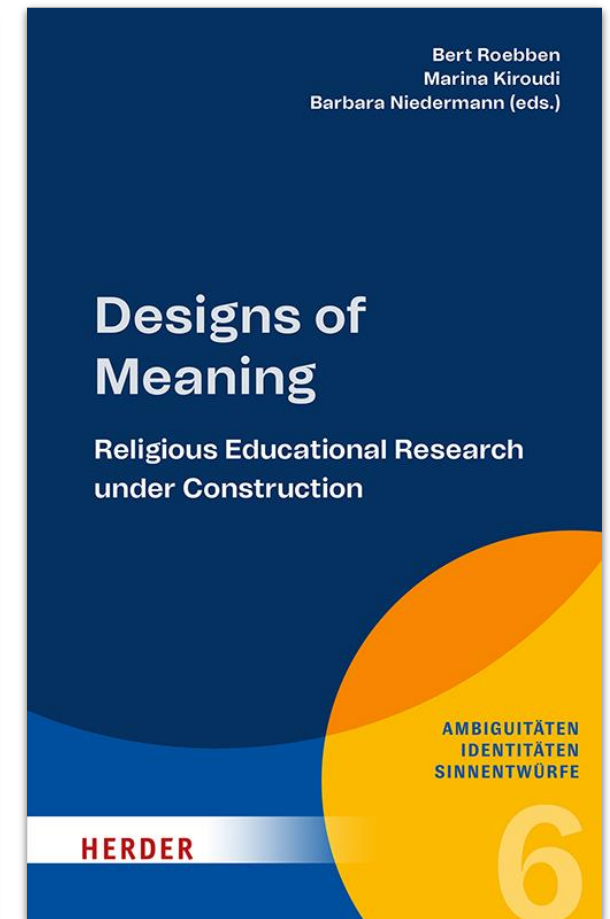
Berglund / Roebben / Schreiner / Schweitzer (eds.)

**Educating Religious
Education Teachers**
Perspectives of International Knowledge Transfer

Bonn University Press

V&R unipress

herder.de (2025b)



The book cover features a dark blue background with a large, stylized graphic of overlapping orange and yellow shapes on the right side. The editors' names 'Bert Roebben', 'Marina Kiroudi', and 'Barbara Niedermann (eds.)' are at the top right. The title 'Designs of Meaning' is in large white font, with the subtitle 'Religious Educational Research under Construction' below it. The publisher's name 'HERDER' is at the bottom left, and the number '6' is in a large white font at the bottom right. The text 'AMBIGUITÄTEN IDENTITÄTEN SINNTWÜRFE' is written in small white letters on the yellow part of the graphic.

Bert Roebben
Marina Kiroudi
Barbara Niedermann (eds.)

**Designs of
Meaning**
Religious Educational Research
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HERDER

AMBIGUITÄTEN
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