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LEARNING FROM RELIGION AT A DETRADITIONALIZING CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY.

THE CASE OF THE REQUIRED COURSE “PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION AND MEANING” AT THE KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN, BELGIUM

ABSTRACT

At the Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven (Belgium), all students are required to follow a course titled “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning”, taught by professors from the Faculty of Theology. This is remarkable since this university, in spite of its history, has a public character to a large extent. In this contribution, the peculiarity of this course is elucidated. Three difficulties with this course, of principal, practical and theological nature, are pointed out. Further, three opportunities of a course like “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning” are considered. To conclude, we draw some lines between these difficulties and opportunities to defend the value of a course like this, even in “pure” public universities.

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In this contribution, we discuss the course “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning” which is compulsory at the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*. In particular, we consider the relation between university and theology from a Belgian perspective. With this, we do not discuss the place of the *Faculty of Theology* at the university, but the place of theology *outside* the Faculty of Theology.

The case of the course “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning” is interesting because the University of Louvain, which is called “Catholic”, largely has a public character. This situation is explained in the first part of this contribution. At the same time, though the course “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning” cannot be described as theology, there is certainly a link between theology and what is done in this course. This will be explained in the second part of the article. In the next part, we discuss three difficulties with this course that are closely connected with the public character of the university and its relation to the Christian-theological character of “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning”. Finally, we briefly discuss three opportunities that a course like “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning” can offer to Catholic universities and public universities with regard to theology. In conclusion, we draw some lines between these difficulties and opportunities to point out the importance of a course like this at confessional and public universities.

1. THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUVAIN, A DETRADITIONALIZING CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY WITH A PUBLIC CHARACTER

1.1 History and present

The *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*, Belgium (*K.U.Leuven*) was founded in 1425 by a papal bull of Martinus V. Today, it is one of the oldest, still existent Catholic universities in the world. The university was abrogated in 1797 by the French Republic and reopened in 1816 as the State University of the United Kingdom of the Low Countries. After the founding of Belgium in 1830 and the abolition of the State University, the Belgian bishops erected a Catholic university, which, after a short time in Malines, became situated again in Leuven. In 1968, the *K.U.Leuven* was split up into two independent universities: the Dutch-speaking *K.U.Leuven* in Leuven and the French-speaking *Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL)*, which moved to Louvain-la-Neuve (in the Walloon part of the country) (Lovaniensia 1986).

Today, the *K.U.Leuven* is a large and “complete” university. It is large because about 35 000 students (ca. 35% of all Flemish university students)

follow a programme at this university (KU Leuven s.a.). It is complete because the *K.U.Leuven* offers programmes in every branch of academia: humanities, science and technology and biomedical science (KU Leuven s.a.). Almost every academic programme that can be followed in Flanders, can be followed at the *K.U.Leuven*.

Because of this size, and because of its long history, the *K.U.Leuven* was always closely intertwined with society. On the one hand, this means that the epithet “Catholic” in the first place refers to the dominant religion of the society. More than a well-considered choice, the Catholic character of the *K.U.Leuven* was originally something obvious. On the other hand, this means that people often associate the *K.U.Leuven* with society rather than with the church. Because of this, the university largely has a public character¹.

1.2 Catholic identity between tradition and contemporary context

However, this public domain, which has always been closely intertwined with the *K.U.Leuven*, has changed much over time. While Catholicism was the dominant religion in Belgium and the whole of life was structured within the perspective of that religion in the past, the possibility of such an all-embracing perspective has been lost under the influence of (post)modernism. The answers offered by religion have come under the pressure of the test of scientific rationality, and religion had to restrict itself to its own domain, namely that of questions of meaning. However, this “detraditionalization” (Heelas, Lash & Morris 1996) may not be identified with secularization. While the traditional forms of religion, *in casu* the Catholic faith, have lost more and more of their domain, this has not heralded a nonreligious era. Religion, meaning and value systems are still present in Belgian society, yet in very diverse forms and often implicitly. Explicit references to religion and meaning are pushed away to the private sphere. Most of the time, religion has to make room for a sometimes frenetic pursuit of neutrality in the public sphere (Boeve 2005:100-109).

Because the *K.U.Leuven* was and is fully part of this society, it has integrated this evolution in its functioning. On the one hand, there are reminiscences of the Catholic history of *K.U.Leuven*. In its name and its mission statement, the *K.U.Leuven* makes clear reference to its Catholic signature. Further, the archbishop is the grand chancellor of the university, and in the protocol, the Faculty of Theology always comes first (e.g. in the annual parade at the beginning of the academic year and on the web pages of the university). On the other hand, the *K.U.Leuven* seldom plays this confessional alignment in the

1 This is also clear in the funding of the university. Just like the other universities in Belgium, the *K.U.Leuven* is financed for the largest part by the State.

public domain. Students of every possible religious background are welcomed. Most of these students do not make their choice for a university based on its religious profile, but based on many other factors (location, programmes, quality of education, facilities etc.). Even more, were the *K.U.Leuven* to stress its Catholic identity stronger, it would probably be a reason for some students not to attend the university. Although there is a university parish funded by the university, it organizes activities for only a small and voluntary section of the public. Furthermore, professors and personnel are not expected to have a clear personal Christian commitment. For them, too, the suggestion to keep the Church in mind more during their activities would cause more of an allergic reaction than applause. One example of this is the refusal of the university to stop its stem cell research on surplus embryos in spite of pressure from Rome to stop the research.

2. THE COURSE “PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION AND MEANING”: LEARNING FROM RELIGION

2.1 History and present

Nevertheless, the confessional background of the *K.U.Leuven* manifests itself in a remarkable way in the required course “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning”² (hereafter referred to as PRM). This course is compulsory for all students in every programme. One cannot graduate as an engineer, doctor or economist without passing the PRM examination. It is usually scheduled in the last year of the bachelor’s and taught by professors of the Faculty of Theology. These professors have a large degree of autonomy to determine the content of the course and the didactical approach, so they can adapt their course for the specific group of students they are teaching. These students are grouped according to their basic training (math students with math students, psychology with psychology, history with history), which not only has consequences in terms of the scientific backgrounds and interests of the students, but also concerning more practical issues as the number of students (groups of twenty students up to groups of some hundreds of students).³

2 “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning” is the official English version of the untranslatable Dutch title “Religie, zingeving en levensbeschouwing”. It is important to have attention for “religion” as well as for “meaning”. This last term aims to make clear that the course concerns not only divine worship, but also more general systems of value or life views (e.g. materialism), that not only influence individual persons, but also culture and society.

3 In the continuation of this article, PRM will sometimes be described by using the phrase “religion education”. We thank Prof. Isabel Phiri who brought this phrase to our attention when we used the less appropriate “religious education”, which

For decades, the course functioned under the heading “Issues in Religious Studies”. The purpose was to acquaint students with theological insights and discussions. However, gradually, under the influence of the changing societal situation, much protest arose against this course. Precisely because of the *de facto* public character of the university, students resisted a clear manifestation of the confessional alignment of the university. As a result, in their speech at the official opening of the academic year 1998-1999, the representation organization of *K.U.Leuven* students pled for the abolition of the required course, which they considered ideological pressure. This led to a highly controversial and public debate, even in the newspapers.⁴ After consideration by the faculty of theology, it was decided not to abolish the course or to offer it as an optional course, but to reform it (Boeve, 2004).⁵

2.2 Course objectives

After the protest of the students, the title of the course was changed to “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning”. From then on, the objectives of the course were first to alert students to the importance of religion in culture and society, with a particular emphasis on the students’ own fields of study. The course aims to make students aware of the religious background and themes that are connected with their own fields of study and with the plural society. Departing from the statement that religious neutrality is impossible, the aspiration is to give students insight into the different religion and value perspectives that are always at stake in actual discussions. An example of this would be to discuss the topic of euthanasia, especially in biomedical programmes. The purpose would be neither to impose a (Roman Catholic) view on students nor to teach them only the arguments, but to give them insight in the value systems behind these arguments.

The second objective of the course is to stimulate students to reflect on their own religious position. In spite of personal freedom in the area of religion, religious choices often turn out to be led by unconscious presuppositions,

reminds more of the “learning in” model of catechesis. However, when a distinction is made in “religion education” between programmes that aim at personal development and programmes that emphasize the study of religions (Chidester et al., 1994:45-50), the course PRM is of the first type (“learning from” rather than “learning about”). For more information about the distinction between “learning in”, “learning about” and “learning from” religion, see amongst others Van der Ven & Ziebertz (1994) and Roebben (2007:148-151).

4 See Boeve & Pollefeyt (1998) and Baele (1998).

5 This decision is also influenced by a pedagogical project that was supported by the university at that moment to reform the course. See Haers, Pollefeyt & Hennion (2000) and Haers, Pollefeyt & Hennion (2001).

which is not in line with the critical attitude that is expected from those who are trained academically.

2.3 Course content

From the abstract theory about the objectives of the PRM course, we move on to the concrete content of the course. During PRM classes, several themes are discussed, for instance suffering and evil, faith and reason, interreligious dialogue, tolerance, religion and science, biomedical ethics, creation and ecology, etc. Professors individually have final responsibility for the content and themes they will discuss in their courses. This offers them the possibility to treat themes that are closely connected with the students' basic training.

In this way, students learn about the themes as such, but at the same time, they are exposed to the religious aspects of reality and the public space. For instance, when students are taught the creation story and the (potential) link with the contemporary ecological crisis, they become acquainted (again) with this story and they can realize that there might be a connection between the creation story and the ecological crisis. However, the final objective of the course is to make students realize that seemingly neutral, objective findings are connected with a whole conglomerate of religious presuppositions.

Because of the Catholic signature of the *K.U.Leuven* and the deep influence Christianity has had on the history of Western society, the themes that are treated in PRM are mostly Christian themes. In this way, first, students learn to realize how strongly their society is influenced by religious views. Second, a thorough introduction into certain positions from the religious field offers the possibility to become acquainted with a specific religious way of thinking and experiencing. Further, by knowing and understanding a particular tradition, the own frames of interpretation can be challenged and one can come to reflection about the own (unconscious) religious tradition (Verstraeten, 1999:10-12).⁶

Besides this attention to Christianity, much attention is paid to the dialogue between Christianity and other religions, and the course clearly does not want to be structured based on the model of "learning in" a specific religion. In this way, the context of a pluralist society as well as the religious diversity among students is taken seriously. The main, general aim of the course is not to acquaint students fully with a specific religion, but to show them that religious questions and answers cannot and may not be completely pushed aside to

6 The developments in the course content and method of PRM are narrowly connected with the development of the hermeneutical-communicative pedagogy of religion at the Faculty of Theology of the *K.U.Leuven*. For more information about this hermeneutical-communicative model, see Maex (2003) and Lombaerts & Pollefeyt (2005).

the private sphere, but have a place in the public forum of culture and society as well.

Thus, the intention of the course is by no means to do neither catechesis – this presupposes Christian faith among students, a presupposition that the *K.U.Leuven* exactly wants to avoid – nor evangelization. The course aims not at changing students' religion, but at making them aware of the religion and values they already have and the implications of these.

3. DIFFICULTIES

At the same time, the concept of PRM is not completely without problems. Difficulties have to be recognized on several levels. The first level we describe as the “principal” level: Is it possible to justify a required religion education course at a university? Further, we discern the “practical” level: Because of the huge diversity among students, for example in the area of religion, it is far from obvious how to find the right way to reach the intended objectives of the course to suit as many students as possible. Third, and maybe most pressing, is a “theological” difficulty: As we elucidated, the objectives of the course are a-confessional, though because of contingent reasons, the means to reach these objectives have a certain confessional character. The question that can be posed is whether this specific means, the course content, is adequate to reach the encompassing course objectives.

3.1 Principal

In the light of the question of the acceptability of PRM, we shall briefly clarify why and under what conditions a required course of religion education can be justified at a university with a quasi-public character. First, we state that a required course of religion education can be justified only if one understands it as something different from the transfer of a specific content of faith to stimulate the own faith of the students, as would be the case if PRM were a kind of catechesis. There is no rational reason to suggest that every well-formed engineer, lawyer or doctor has to have at his or her disposal a thorough knowledge of a certain tradition of faith. Moreover, the autonomous choice of an adult student for a certain field of training is ignored in this case. In addition, the fact that the course is a full component of the curriculum – finishing one's studies is impossible without passing the course of religion education – may feel as a restriction of the religious liberty of students.

When religion education is understood as personal development in the religious sphere, the door to the justification of the course in an academic curriculum is opened wider. A lawyer or doctor is first of all a human person.

Therefore, the education of this person contributes to his or her formation as a lawyer or a doctor.

However, this stress on the education of the whole human person does not suit every view of what a university is and should be. Roughly, one can discern two types of university. Traditionally, universities refer to the ideal of *universitas*: the university as an institution that gains universal (in the sense of universally valid) knowledge via persons and transfers knowledge to form persons universally (in the sense of covering a comprehensive domain of knowledge). Not the least because of post-modern critics on these ideals of universality, the university today is often considered as an institute that enables access to a specific vocation. Neither the development of universal knowledge nor the formation of universal minds is central then, but the training that prepares for a specific task in society and the development of knowledge that supports this training (Barnet & Standish 2003:222-224).⁷ In this last type, when emphasis is put on academic education as preparation for a specific profession, the connection with the general education of the person that is trained is considered less relevant. If, conversely, the university is considered as an institution that aims at developing universal minds, religion education can claim a legitimate position. Even then, however, religion education can acquire a legitimate position only if it is considered as an essential part of this universal idea of knowledge and of personal education. If religion is seen as an expression of a lack of rationality and humanity (as is the case in the contemporary radical atheism in the line of Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, for instance), religion education can never gain a legitimate place in any concept of university. To accept the value of religion education, one has to regard the religious dimension as an essential part of the human being (for instance as is argued by Van Huyssteen 2006) and to consider religion as a distinct but legitimate domain of knowledge (cf. Hirst & Peters 1970:63-64).

3.2 Practical

Considering the “practical” level, the situation in which PRM is embedded in Leuven poses several difficulties because the diversity among students is enormous. In a society that is marked by the presence of Christianity on the

7 Pavel Zgaga (Zgaga 2009) is more nuanced when discerning four “archetypal models” for the modern university: the Napoleonic model (the university as an institution which trains people for a specific task and career in their society), the Humboldtian model (the university and its teachers and students serve in function of the creation of knowledge), the Newmanian model (where the development of the personal intellect has a central place) and the Deweyan model (the university as a preparation for students to become active citizens). Since in the light of the argumentation of this paper, it is mainly the opposition to the first model that is important, we will use a less nuanced dichotomy.

one hand but that is detraditionalized and pluralized on the other hand, there are students that carry a large baggage of Christianity from home, students that have received the Catholic rites of initiation⁸ but do not (want to) come into further contact with the church, students that have a religion different from Christianity, as well as students who are indifferent or sceptical towards the phenomenon of religion. The reflection aimed at in PRM cannot occur without any knowledge about religions. However, the huge diversity among students concerning their acquaintanceship with religion makes this very difficult.

Moreover, students differ not only in the religious domain, but also with regard to age, cultural background and socio-economic possibilities, one can notice an increasing diversity. Owing to this broad diversity, students also differ with regard to their interests. Because of these diverging interests, it is not always easy to influence and motivate all the students.

In the PRM course in Leuven, an attempt is made to respond to this difficulty by approaching the field of religion via different themes. Students are grouped according to their fields of basic study, so this field is considered as “common interest”. Therefore, professors try to connect with the interests of the students by discussing religious themes that underlie the students’ fields of study. For example, in the course presented to students from exact sciences, attention is paid to the relation between science and religion; in the course presented to future doctors, there is much attention for human suffering; in the course presented to economics students, economic justice, for instance in Catholic social thought, plays an important role.

3.3 Theological

The most important difficulty with PRM is grounded in theology and religious studies. As we have explained, the objectives of PRM are very general: making students aware of religious presuppositions in society and their own thoughts. At the same time, we indicated that, because of historically contingent reasons, the major focus in the course lies on Christianity. The question that has to be posed is whether these general objectives can be realized through such a specific content.

It seems that the current broad objectives of the PRM course can be realized only through the current content when it is presupposed that the Christian tradition discussed is paradigmatic for what is called in the objectives the “religious way of thinking”. This might suggest that the ultimate characteristic of all religions can be found in Christianity, or even more, that Christianity is the criterion for that which can be considered as “religious”.

8 In Belgium, traditionally, one is baptized as a baby and takes one’s first Communion at the age of 6 or 7, and confirmation is administered at about the age of 12.

For instance, when the students work with the theme “faith and reason”, the point of view is Catholicism. In this religion, compatibility of faith with reason is highly important. However, it would be misleading if students derive from this that all religions have such a willing attitude towards reason. Therefore, one can ask whether the attention given to a certain specific religious tradition is more than just a contingent fact and whether it influences the character of the course in an essential way.

This question probably cannot be answered unless an appropriate didactic approach is followed. In the concrete elaboration of a course such as PRM, this critique can be overcome by the effort of the teacher to show that the Christian perspective is a particular perspective. Further, there has to be continuing exertion to stimulate students to extend their reflection from Christian themes to other religious themes. For example, when teaching about the relation between Christianity and domestic violence, by referring to cases of domestic violence in the context of other religions, students can become aware that the course is not only about Christianity but also about religion and values that are more general and about their impact on different aspects of daily life.

However, one must never lose sight of this concern about the discrepancy between the objectives and the content of the course; otherwise, the justification of the required course could come under pressure.

4. OPPORTUNITIES

Besides these difficulties, a required course in religion education offers many opportunities. In this contribution, we highlight three of them. The first is the possibility for universities to maintain their Catholic character in a society that wants to push this character more and more to the personal sphere. Secondly, we refer to the opportunities a required course like PRM offers to society, and thus not only to confessional universities but also to public universities. Thirdly, we point to the opportunities that a required course in religion education can offer to theology itself.

4.1 Manifestation of “catholicity”

An opportunity of a course like PRM is that it can be considered as a strong manifestation of the “catholicity” of a university in which Christian identity is fading. Central to this argumentation is the interpretation of “catholicity” according to its etymology: “*kat’holou*”, “under the whole” and thus “universal”. This catholicity is expressed in the specific view of the human person and in the specific view of knowledge, which are the necessary conditions for justifying a required course in religion education in the curriculum of a quasi-public university.

First, concerning the view of the human person, one can state that a “Catholic”, thus complete, view considers professional activities to be only one aspect of a person, as is elaborated for instance in the personalism of Louis Janssens (Janssens 1970; 1980:3-17; cf. Selling 1998, and Geldhof 2009). Therefore, a university model that simply prepares students for a very specific vocation in society has shortcomings. According to a “Catholic” view, a curriculum must focus not only on developing a person to become an economist, IT specialist or historian, but also on developing human capacities that are more general. Although the student’s choice of specific training has to be respected, other domains of knowledge also have to be given a chance. In particular, domains referring to religious possibilities of a human being must be given a chance. Starting from a real complete view of the human person, one also has to try to develop the religious possibilities of a human being.

Second, concerning the view of knowledge, one can either consider it as a detached value or emphasize that knowledge is always part of a broader whole: There is no knowledge without wisdom that is more encompassing. The second view, that knowledge is always part of a broader whole, is a more comprehensive and thus “Catholic” view.⁹ At a “Catholic” university, knowledge not only has to be developed and passed on to amplify knowledge and the possible benefits flowing from this knowledge, but always has to be embedded in a view of wisdom and truth that is more comprehensive. This truth concerns the whole of reality, not only the technical and economic domain. The religious can also be seen as part of this reality.

Thus, the PRM course that is taught at the *K.U.Leuven* can be considered as an expression of fidelity to these “Catholic” views of the human person and knowledge, in a context that strongly hinders emphasizing the Christian identity of the university. By making students aware of the religious dimension of reality and their own religious presuppositions, human beings and knowledge are considered “Catholic” rather than merely technical-scientific or skill-oriented.

4.2 Sense of public responsibility

A course like PRM can be a great opportunity for public universities, too. At least, this could be the case when the university is not considered as a training institution for specific professions, but as an institute of general education that prepares citizens for their roles in society.

Of course, what we presented above as a “Catholic” view of the human person and knowledge is not exclusive to Catholicism. A public university, too, can defend a similar view, as is already indicated by the term “university” (cf.

9 For instance, the presence of this view in the Catholic Church can be seen in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, the apostolic constitution of Catholic universities from 1990.

“universal”). Religion education can be a way of concretizing this view. In this way, scientists are trained how to deal with religious issues, not only in their profession but also in their social and personal lives. Thus, science can stay connected with the human context in which it originated.

If a public university emphasizes its societal function and the fact that it prepares students for taking a place in society, the university also cannot neglect the reality that religion still plays a role in society. Not only is the societal order – at least in Europe – comprehensible only with insight into the religious structure that partially forms the foundation of this order, but furthermore religious presuppositions also deeply influence several social debates.

When a society wants to be able to cope rationally with the deep influence of religions, it needs citizens that have at their disposal the skills to reflect and communicate about religions. Only when one is able to cope with religious questions, one can really debate religious questions with others.

4.3 Contribution to theology

Finally, we cast a quick look in another direction. Up to now, we have considered the opportunities of PRM vis-à-vis the university. However, one can also consider the possibilities of a course of religion education vis-à-vis theological research because, despite the broad, a-confessional objectives of the course, the connection with theology is never far away since the teachers of the PRM course are professors of the Faculty of Theology.

To these teachers, contact with students from other faculties and other areas of study means an opportunity to keep contact between their theological reflections and “the world”. Without this contact, theological thinking risks to rest in itself, which can lead to “ghetto theology” (Mouton 2005:12-13). In this way, theology neglects society, one of its three reference groups (society, academia and church) that were expressed by David Tracy (Tracy 1981:3-98). PRM forces theology to speak to society, by confronting theologians with people from outside their faculty and in this way with new developments in society and in science

5. CONCLUSION

In this contribution, we sketched the situation of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and the required course “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning”. Though the *K.U.Leuven* has a long Catholic tradition, this confessional character has been fading away largely over the past four decades. However, the PRM course remains a clear manifestation of this confessional alliance.

Consequently, in this peculiar situation, the PRM course is confronted with several difficulties, of which we discussed three. However, at the same time, a course like PRM can offer some important opportunities.

When we look back on the difficulties with the PRM course, we see that university (the question of the justification of religion education in an academic curriculum), society (difficulties posed by the diversity among students) and theology (the split between the specific course content and general objectives) challenge this course. At the same time, when we consider the opportunities of this course, we see that PRM has something to offer to this same university (to express its catholic or universal character), society (educating citizens that are able to cope rationally with religion) and theology (keeping contact with “the world”).

Therefore, “Perspectives on Religion and Meaning” can be seen at least as a way to connect these three domains: university, society and theology. Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider a course like this not only at confessional universities, but also at other universities that attach value to the connection and interaction between these domains, which could be public universities as well.

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