

HERMENEUTICS AND RELIGION TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

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Abstract

In the light of the debates and developments surrounding religion, and in view of the impact of religious and cultural diversity and human rights in the educational context worldwide, and in the South African educational context in particular, this article will try to explain what has led to these changes and academic debates. The implementation of the National Policy on Religion and Education in September 2003 seems to be superficial in nature and it appears as if transformation is not taking place. This article argues from theoretical and practical descriptions that in order to implement religion teaching and learning in tertiary and school education in general, a hermeneutical framework and an understanding of social constructivism may have the propensity to contribute to religion teaching and learning.

Key words: Hermeneutics, Religion teaching and learning, Social constructivism, Social construct curriculum

Introduction

Over the past fifteen years religion teaching and learning as a scientific field has undergone drastic changes in the educational environment – particularly in teacher training in higher education. The social context of the world has also changed over the past few years: We have seen conflict being influenced by the social, fundamental and fundamentalist political and religious environments. It is also commonly known that religion as a phenomenon has been controversial and debatable throughout the centuries. It is most likely that it will continue to be so in the future.

In the light of the debates and developments surrounding religion, and in view of the impact of religious and cultural diversity and human rights in the educational context worldwide and in the South African educational context in particular, it is necessary to explain what has led to these changes and academic debates by means of theoretical and practical descriptions. This article intends to focus on the following spheres of influence in religion teaching and learning:

- Hermeneutics and religion teaching and learning;
- Social-constructivism: Curriculum theory as praxis,¹
- Research and religion teaching and learning.

¹ *Praxis* entails the *critical actions* and *decisions* by responsible individuals regarding the interpretation of a specific situation.

Hermeneutics and Religion Teaching and Learning

Hermeneutics is a broad discourse with various approaches that are associated with philosophers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Hermeneutics, which is also described as *the art of understanding*, represents a process of enabling an understanding of the etymology (history of origin) of language, text, or context. That which was strange is made interpretable and relevant to the current situation or environment. Thus hermeneutics is not merely an interpretation method that is used, but also an investigation into the *concept of understanding*. Hermeneutics was originally applied in the interpretation of religious texts or writings in order to make these texts understandable to the reader or interpreter. Hermeneutical frameworks and interpretation methods for traditional religious texts were also later developed to elucidate texts or religious writings for children, taking into account their understanding of religion at a given stage of religious development (Roux, 1989; 1994a).

Within the context of secularisation, globalisation, diversity and inclusivity, over the past few decades hermeneutics has also developed as a relevant discipline within religion teaching and learning. It has become more and more essential to bridge the gap between religious traditions and the social constructs of contemporary societies. Against this background one can argue that hermeneutics can bridge the gap between religious traditions and social constructs, as mentioned above. Even though hermeneutics can traditionally be defined as the art of understanding (Gadamer, 1975; Roux, 1989), religion teaching and learning creates an ideal space within which to engage with the contents of the subject discipline hermeneutically in order to develop the social-constructivist curriculum theory further. Intra-religious² and inter-religious³ dialogue⁴ and concepts of understanding within the school context are already a part of international and local debate and discourse. Relevant research, policy documents and social constructs within the school context require that educators have to engage in these debates within a hermeneutical framework, and that they must apply hermeneutical principles such as contextualising, interpretation and relevance in laying the foundation for curriculum design.

The question is: Which problems can be investigated hermeneutically if one considers religion teaching and learning from within a multi-religious frame of reference? Lombaerts and Pollefeyt (2004) emphasise the points of correspondence between religion teaching and learning and hermeneutics in their book *Hermeneutics and Religious Education*. They challenge traditional theological hermeneutics or interpreters to broaden hermeneutics as a field of investigation, and to take note of the influences and importance of educational environments in the field of hermeneutics. The argument can be extended by stating that hermeneutics in religion teaching and learning, from the perspective of social constructivism, can also provide relevant discourses for hermeneutical debates in theology and/or religion studies of any theology and/or religion.

In order to understand the debates regarding hermeneutics and religion teaching and learning, it is necessary briefly to provide a theoretical basis for these debates, since the notion seems to be significant to depart from the premise that hermeneutics and social-constructivist curriculum theory have much in common. In both cases the context, the envi-

² *Intrareligious* refers to conversations and dialogue between groups/denominations of the same religious tradition.

³ *Interreligious* refers to conversations and dialogue between different religions.

⁴ *Dialogue* is neither communication nor conversation, but the search for meanings and the unearthing of knowledge. Dialogue (Greek *dia* = through and *logos* = word) means that the word is the medium through which the meaning or solution for the deed, occasion, problem or any action can be found.

ronment, the reader and/or the interpreter of the text and/or the content are placed in relation to one another in order to improve the concepts of understanding.

In a hermeneutical framework for textual interpretation of religious texts for children (Roux 1989), this framework relied on the interpretation of text and the historical as described by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer in his work *Truth and Method* (1975). Gadamer (1975:263) regards hermeneutics as not merely the method of interpretation and understanding, but as an attempt to describe and explain the circumstances within which understanding must be able to take place. Gadamer's point of view is that underlying prejudices and misperceptions can influence interpretation and that understanding of *the other* is always an interpretation (1975:358).

Understanding one another is thus not necessarily a given: Before dialogue and understanding of *the other* is possible, people must first understand themselves. This argument of Gadamer is questioned, since dialogue in religion teaching and learning is an instrument that can be used to get to know and understand *other* and *oneself* better. In the process of getting to know oneself better and understanding one's actions and perceptions, one tries to understand other people as they understand themselves. In this process *empathy* can be experienced – by placing oneself in the other's shoes (Cornille, 2005; Du Preez, 2006). Self-knowledge is not a condition for dialogue, but a possible outcome of dialogue. In that sense one can draw from the Indian saying *You can never judge another person until you have walked a mile in his or her moccasins*, which describes the concept that self-knowledge should be a prerequisite for real dialogue.

Understanding is always an interpretive process, and one's own preconceptions and prejudices influence these interpretations. The art of *understanding* lies in the fact that the object of the *otherness* of the text (in this case [multi]-religion content) must appeal to the interpreter (teacher, student or lecturer) in order for understanding to be possible. Understanding of the other is, therefore, a productive process, and thus interpretations and individuals' perceptions can and will fluctuate continuously. Furthermore, in his work Gadamer identified one problem that is also relevant to religion teaching and learning and the interpretation of text and historical facts: How does one distinguish between genuine prejudices and misunderstandings and false prejudices? Gadamer suggests that one must develop a consciousness that can isolate the conscience of one's own prejudices, in order that one can judge *the other* on merit alone. Thus hermeneutics must develop continuously and attention should be redirected away from the understanding of the true content of the text or historical events, toward the understanding of the intentions (Warnke, 1987:9).

The criticism of Lundin, Thiselton and Walhout (1985:110) regarding Gadamer's theory is that it leaves no room for hermeneutical principles that can help to describe what can be considered a responsible interpretation. They argue that the interpreted activities must be demonstrated without it being necessary to ask questions about their validity, norms or truth. Lundin *et al.* (1985) base their approach to this hermeneutical theory on the philosophy of *action* instead of *language*. Thus hermeneutics does not necessarily always relate to the language that must be conveyed, but often to the interpretation of the *action*, in other words how text/content/links are interpreted and then applied by the authors and the readers. This argument has a direct influence on the handling of religion teaching and learning within a social construct such as a diverse educational environment, lecture hall and/or classroom. Students and teachers are constantly involved in dealing interactively with the content and text that they interpret from their own and others' perspectives. The action (*praxis*) that they apply in whatever way in the teaching and learning environment thus becomes a direct product of a hermeneutical exercise.

Hermeneutics also has an educational function (Gadamer, 1975), namely that of revealing the truth and taking a position in order that the audience (in this case the student) can understand and learn about it. One can argue that hermeneutics in a diverse environment is the discovery of various (diverse) individuals' *truths*. This relates to how one differs from or agrees with others regarding these *truths*, as well as how one's specific *truth* complements the *truths* of others. It is not the revelation of the truths of different individuals, but an acknowledgement that truth is *relative*. The acknowledgement of the relativity of truths can also serve as a valuable condition for dialogue in a diverse environment.

Diversity is taken into account in religion teaching and learning and the core aspect should thus be *dialogue*. The lecturer (or teacher) must provide the student (or learner) with the opportunity to understand and interpret the *otherness* and in so doing try to change his/her prejudices to a richer and more developed understanding of the others' issues and problems. An attempt must be made to change concepts from the student's (learner's) own notions of religion into opportunities for understanding first one's *own* and then the so-called *unknown* religious contents. This hermeneutical approach of lecturers (teachers) and students (learners) therefore has a direct influence on religious environments beyond the formal educational context and in the broad society within which the educational community functions.

Religious Literacy

A consequence of *action hermeneutics*, and an important component of religion teaching and learning, is the development of *religious literacy*. Religious literacy is based on two components, namely the hermeneutical and the communicative (Roebben, 2004:204). Religious literacy can be described as the ability to develop a self-identification (the self) and to communicate with understanding with or about world opinions (the other). The hermeneutical must attempt to make sense of the content and explain the interaction between the past and the present concept of understanding. The communicative must eventually become dialogue, where one situates one's critical approach within a specific context, for example how one expresses oneself, how one analyses the events or context, and whether one is critical of the influence of the diversity of religions, world opinions and globalisation on one's direct religious, social and living environment.

However, the question remains: Does religion teaching and learning provide the student (learner) with a safe environment within which to ask these core questions and enter into dialogue with the other? Within hermeneutical learning the process of asking original questions and generating information can be used to broaden one's own knowledge. In religious literacy one acquires the processes of a religious conscience so that one may participate, with understanding, in the discourses of the religious and social environment. The education student (student teacher) must thus be able to interpret, construct, deconstruct⁵ and reconstruct in order to create new contents from old contents and make them understandable. Religious literacy should then enable the student to interpret the environment of the text or content and to make it relevant to the social construct of the diverse social environment. The social and changing environment is a living mechanism and the construct is constantly changing. Religion teaching and learning thus also adopts an *interpretive role* in

⁵ *Deconstruction* is an important intermediate process in which *construction* and *reconstruction* of thoughts take place. Deconstruction can also be a link between hermeneutics and social construct, since deconstruction deals with the philosophy of *meaning* and with ways in which meaning is constructed and comprehended by readers (interpreters) of writers' texts.

order to interpret the basic elements and experience of the social construct and changing environment, and to make them clear to the relevant role players.

Dialogue between different religions and in ecumenical environments, for instance, must also be challenged from the perspective of religion teaching and learning. Dialogue on inclusivity, diversity and exclusivity is taking place in religion teaching and learning. Theological research should therefore also explicitly take note of research within religion teaching and learning in order to debate and understand the hermeneutical questions regarding different conceptions of a social construct. The question can be raised as to whether theological research into for example *intercultural hermeneutics* (text hermeneutics within one religion) as described by Jonker (2006) should not also take note of the pedagogical research and the perspectives of *action hermeneutics* (content interpretation). The motivation is that the social construct with which a specific theological or religious environment comes into contact is not just diverse within one religious environment, but is also part of a greater, diverse religious society. The art of religious literacy is that education students and teachers can also convey this literacy to the school community (learners) and broader society (parents and community).

Social-constructivist Curriculum Theory as Praxis

In her work *Curriculum in Context* (1990) Catherine Cornbleth argues that the contextual dynamics and the socially constructed relationships are important for curriculum development. According to Grundy (1987:7), the specific social context within which curriculum knowledge is reconstructed, is important. It represents the principle on which the curriculum is constructed. This means that various role players in this social construct must not only be in cooperation with the environment, but must also have a clear understanding of the environment (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Du Preez, 2005:35, 41; Ferguson & Roux, 2003a; 2003b). Curriculum is also practice, which means that all participants in the curriculum must be handled as *subjects*, and not as *objects*. The rights and status of the participants in the curriculum practice thus have a direct influence on the decision-making processes, the purpose, the contents and the presentation strategies.

Religion teaching and learning is not only based on the action-hermeneutical principle, but also on social-constructivist curriculum theory. The impact and influence of the social environment on the development of curriculum theories and strategies make it necessary for academics in this field of study to *deconstruct* constructed, intrinsic, religious knowledge in order to *reconstruct* (within the social construct) the relationship between the interpretation and meaning of the knowledge or content (hermeneutics) in order to attempt to understand diversity and inclusivity within the complexity of the social educational environment.

Religion teaching and learning thus practises *praxis* as a point of departure. Praxis entails the critical actions and decisions by responsible individuals (lecturer, student teacher or teacher), who must take these actions on the basis of an interpretation of the intention of a situation. A thorough understanding of the situation is necessary and this concept must be carried further by means of debates, so that the situation can be better understood. Praxis is a critical action where retrospection takes place continually in order to shape or influence the future action (Grundy, 1987).

In order to apply praxis within the curriculum, a hermeneutical interpretation is used as a fundamental point of departure. Praxis presupposes certain principles for the manner in which people interact with each other, and then suggests the principles according to which communities can behave in order to form a *reasonable* society (one that is acceptable to the

majority of the environment). This behaviour must make sense to the whole community. In this case the whole community is defined as the *educational community*. It is not always possible to reach the goal where all individuals will be good, active decision makers. Nonetheless, it is important to facilitate these skills in order to attempt to reach a common outcome. A holistic approach in teaching and learning leads to effective praxis. The hybrid character and the development of transformative world opinions and religious and cultural forms also influence these socially constructed curriculum processes. The debate on religion and praxis is not an academic exercise. Academics who are involved with diversity and inclusivity in religion teaching and learning are aware of this increasing social force which directly influences the religion curricula (Jackson, 1997; 1999; Roux, 1999b; 2001; 2004; 2005a; Ferguson & Roux, 2004; Roux & Du Preez, 2006). This principle is further expanded in religion teaching and learning where students, as fellow designers of the curriculum, enter into dialogue and show understanding toward their own and other religions. Students assimilate their religious praxis and opinions, and surround their own life philosophy with the social context of the other.

Implications of Praxis for Religion Teaching and Learning

Globalisation, democratisation and secularisation make it necessary to re-examine religion teaching and learning within the educational context. Most democratic states function from within a humanist frame of reference and determine the social construct of the society and the handling of religious and cultural diversity. Secularisation, which also has a social impact on religions, can bridge the gap between persons, groupings, social and educational environments from within the religious tradition and the social context. Taking into account the secularisation of society and the deliberate questioning of many religious actions and traditions, this debate must also take place within religion teaching and learning. Not all people within educational environments are necessarily religious. These implications thus directly influence the curriculum for religion in educational environments.

One is constantly and acutely aware of the paradigm shift and transformation processes that student training and practising teachers in the South African educational system have had to make in the past few years with regard to the democratisation and secularisation of religion within the school context. The politicising of religion education in South African schools and teacher training in the previous political dispensation, which was supported by policy documents and curriculum contents from within a specific religious context, disregarded the diversity of denominations and religions within the broader education and specifically within the school context. In the past, this politicising had a direct influence on the development of curricula and praxis in religion teaching and learning. Teachers have been influenced by the resistance to and perceptions of transformation, as well as by globalisation. These teachers are required to interpret and implement policy documents from within their own philosophies of religion. It is not only within religion teaching and learning that this trend exists; it is prevalent in every sphere of education where transformation has to take place. However, in religion teaching and learning there are personal, religious and spiritual dimensions that considerably complicate the process of transformation and the inclusion of different religions in the curriculum and praxis (Roux, 2006a; 2007a).

One of the most well known educational philosophers, Paolo Freire (1994), who also had the greatest impact in the quest for social justice, best described the role and task of the teacher in social construct in the following way: *[It is the task of] progressive educators, today and yesterday, ... to use the past that influences the present. The past was not only a*

time of authoritarianism and imposed silence, but also a time that generated a culture of resistance as an answer to the violence of power.

Against the backdrop of the above quotation and the earlier description of religion teaching and learning as it exists within the international political arena and academic lecture halls, the following questions need to be posed unequivocally:

- To what extent does the social environment (social construct) influence teacher training and school practice for religion teaching and learning?
- Is the student/learner allowed to develop critical thought regarding religions and world perspectives?
- Has the educational environment maintained social justice regarding religion teaching and learning at all social and educational levels in the past?
- How can religious diversity be managed in education?

If the student or teacher expresses and maintains a fundamentalist and narrow approach to diversity in social and religious environments, as well as to the influence thereof, these attitudes and opinions will clearly influence the handling of school praxis (Roux, 2001; 2004; Ferguson & Roux, 2003a; 2004; Roux & Du Preez, 2006). John Hull, a doyen of multireligion education in Britain, warns against the dangers of *religionism* in education. According to Hull (2000), religionism is strengthened by the religious character of the teacher, who becomes fundamentalist and more religious, with an intensified concept of the religious convictions of the individual involved. This can have a direct influence on the way in which religion teaching and learning and praxis are handled in the classroom (Roux, 1999a; 1999b).

Further demands are also made on religion education (teaching and learning) within the reality of the South African context in terms of diversity and inclusivity. If inclusivity in the social-constructivist curriculum is a reality, Africanisation of the curriculum for religion teaching and learning becomes the next facet (Roux, 2005a; Roux, 2007d). As mentioned before, respect for diversity and a positive attitude toward inclusivity are important content elements of a socially constructed curriculum. An exclusive curriculum reflects only the self from within a specific value system and/or frame of reference. As an example a(n) (South) Africanised curriculum (in the broadest understanding of *Africanness*) cannot reflect indigenous knowledge without including the influence of other traditional religious knowledge, for example Asian, Eastern or Western influences over the centuries on the (South) Africanising of the social construct and religions in South Africa. Important perspectives on (South) Afro-centric values, value orientations and morality are excluded if this narrow definition is accepted and maintained. Thus a curriculum that wants to represent the social construct fully, that wishes to be inclusive of all the various religions and worldviews, values and morality, and wants to respect diversity, must include the full social African dynamic of the various religions, traditions and worldviews.

Research Initiatives of Education in Religion Teaching and Learning

Since 1993, research in religion teaching and learning, which was initiated in the Department of Curriculum Studies at Stellenbosch University (South Africa), has been hermeneutically oriented, and has entailed contextually and practically guided investigations. The three important facets of hermeneutical principles for curriculum design, namely context, environment and interpreter of the content, are investigated and incorporated into research designs and projects. Empirical research in religion teaching and learning also makes spe-

cific demands of the researchers themselves with regard to their position as internal authority⁶ (*insider*) and external authority (*outsider*) of the specific religious environment and/or subject (Jackson, 1997; McCutcheon, 1999; Roux, 2004). The researcher's position as internal or external authority on the religious, emotional and spiritual aspects should be clearly described and distinguished from the research objects. This means that the analyses and results are also contextualised and can correspondingly claim contextual relevance. They should thus exclude generalisations. The conscious connection between religion and/or culture and the researcher is used to delimit the research terrain. The researcher's position and understanding of the different religions and social contexts thus also serve as the link for the generation of situative knowledge.

Research in religion teaching and learning in this department focuses on the following aspects:

- Determining the perceptions of the receiver (learner and/or student) of religion teaching and learning regarding new curriculum contents (text);
- Determining the presenter's (teacher and/or lecturer's) interpretation of selected contents and interactions (facilitation strategies) with the learner and/or student (interpreter);
- Exploring a curriculum approach to teaching and learning so that the contextualisation of the curriculum praxis in the education environment can be promoted.

The Receiver of/or Collaborator in Teaching and Learning

The first research projects (Roux, 1993; 1994b) focused on primary and secondary educational environments (schools). Thereafter research was undertaken with students in religion teaching and learning on tertiary level (Roux, 1996; 1999). This research was mainly motivated by the learners' perceptions of religion within the school context before a possible implementation of multi-religion teaching and learning programmes in the South African school education system. Since religion teaching and learning in South Africa had already become politicised, issues regarding religions were still being discussed within the educational context in the media and in various public domains. Media reporting thus created a platform for the fears and objections of religious institutions, educational environments and parents, before any empirical research could determine the real perceptions of the receivers of the learning material regarding prejudices, misunderstandings or prejudices. Communal values are usually identified as *non-negotiable elements* of a specific religious tradition or educational community. These values are then protected from within a specific tradition in order to accommodate the so-called majority of the school or educational environment, without taking into account the rights of minority groups in the school environment.

Research was therefore firstly focused on the *receiver* (learners or students) of teaching and learning in environments where *understanding* must be interpreted in order to identify and examine prejudices. Investigations were launched to determine whether students' and learners' perceptions of religious concepts which differ from their own can have any determining influence on teaching and learning (Roux, 1993; 1994b). Children's (receivers') own religious perceptions were determined before any other religious contents were pre-

⁶ An *internal authority* is a person who undertakes research in a well-known religious environment and religious community, and possibly practises the same religion. An *external authority* is a person who does research in a religious environment to which he/she does not belong.

sented. After religion teaching and learning had been presented over a period of time, a second round of perception surveys was conducted. Results of this research proved indisputably that receivers of multi-religion teaching and learning do not experience any confusion regarding their own religious background or that of other religions. Primary and secondary school learners handled own religious and spiritual dimensions and concepts far better than was initially expected, and fears and objections could be dispelled (Roux, 1993; 1994b; 1996b). However, there was a clear distinction between learners who come from a religious context where aggressive truths regarding religion (Küng, 1995) are accepted to such an extent that other standpoints regarding religious truths are not tolerated at all. The paradigm shift of a mono-religious to a multi-religious teaching and learning programme can indeed be one of the most difficult facets of religion teaching and learning (Roux, 1997). Encouraging students and teachers to investigate the *phenomenon* of an unknown religion can lead to a sense of disillusionment (Roux & Steenkamp, 1995), especially if these students come from a mono-religious background or environment. The study and knowledge of other religions, which emphasises historical facts instead of a personal, religious lifestyle and growth, can be part of this disillusionment (Cole, 1988:97).

This research was an extremely important link for policy planners and curriculum designers.⁷ The results were also shared with the *receivers* (learners/students) as the first link in the hermeneutical framework, so that the pastoral role of the lecturer and researcher as *interpreter* of the text or learning material could be investigated. The learners and students thus started to participate as collaborators in the development of a socially constructed curriculum by making perceptual demands of the curriculum and praxis.

The Presenter's Interpretation, Interactions and Facilitation Strategies

In an argument to describe a presenter's interpretation, interaction and facilitation strategies one can rely on the Lebanese philosopher, poet and artist, Kahlil Gibran's description of teaching and teachers in chapter 18 on teaching in his book *The Prophet*. He describes a good teacher as a person *who is indeed wise and who does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind*.

The *presenter's* (student teacher or teacher's) interpretation of the text in hermeneutical context is a determining factor in religion teaching and learning. In this regard the presenter/teacher is the first interpreter of the text or content. As previously mentioned, the interpretation of the learning material in hermeneutical terms is not necessarily always the language which is conveyed, but also the *action* and the interpretation of the text, contents or connections, as well as the application thereof (action hermeneutics).

The presentation of religion teaching and learning in social constructivism requires a professional person who must be able to understand diversity and inclusivity within the interpretation of action hermeneutics. The principle that is involved is that the professional presenter of multi-religion teaching and learning programmes must be able to contribute to the development of religious literacy and life skills in students and learners, through which respect and tolerance can develop and function naturally. Should academics accept that

⁷ The results and the reports of the research projects undertaken in 1993, 1994, and 1997 were taken notice of at the ministerial committees formulating the policy on Religion in Education (2003). Results of these projects, specifically on the perceptions of primary and secondary school learners on multireligion education were disseminated through workshops to members of the Youth Commission of the Dutch Reformed Church and other religious organisational, Provincial Departments of Education and at different tertiary institutions engaging in teacher training.

changes in school praxis will remain a myth if diversity in schools is not appreciated, and if the education profession shows resistance to the contribution of [multi]-religion teaching in the social construct of the community? One should then argue that religion teaching and learning can only make a difference if presenters/teachers and curriculum planners are professionally well grounded in social-constructivist curriculum theory and praxis. One should also contend that professional teachers must become aware of their own religiosity, professionalism and position as internal or external authorities on religions.

Kuhn (2003:9) argues that the transition from one paradigm to a new model is not a cumulative process whereby the possibilities of the old paradigm are merely extended. A reconstruction of a new paradigm is based on new, fundamental theories and applications (Roux, 1999b). Kuhn contends that there can be an overlap where previous problem areas between the old and the new paradigm or model can be overcome. This so-called overlapping of the old dispensation of religion teaching and learning and the new policy regarding religion in education (Department of Education, 2003) directly influences the manner in which the teacher or interpreter of the text or content makes the applications. Research has shown (Roux, 1997; Ferguson & Roux, 2003a; 2003b; 2004; Roux, 2005b; Roux & Du Preez, 2006) that practising teachers find it very difficult to trust the new curriculum and theories, and still rely on a fundamentalist and confessional presentation and view of religion teaching and learning. This approach does not only undermine the social construct of the school environment and the broad community, but also has a direct influence on teacher training at tertiary environments. Student teachers' tertiary training and praxis in school differ to such an extent that a new approach to religion teaching and learning will have to be found, and new channels and possibilities in education must be investigated to promote religious literacy among student teachers and practising teachers. Student teachers who make a paradigm shift during their training are immediately mistrusted by the practising teaching profession as far as their knowledge, skills and praxis are concerned. The schooled and professional *interpreters* (student teachers) of the text, who apply the social-constructivist curriculum theory and facilitation strategies, are dismissed as *inexperienced* within the existing teaching profession.

The professional skills of the interpreter and the apparently reluctant attitude toward the new paradigm question the professionalism of teachers in practice. Training and professionalism in mono-religion are often experienced as two different sides of the same coin. The Policy Document: *Religion in Education* (Department of Education, 2003) describes the type of professionalism that teachers must maintain toward learners of other religions and worldviews. This professionalism requires a teacher who respects diversity and is knowledgeable in the subject field, thus making it possible for religion to be studied without any proselytising of learners. However, research has proved that teachers define professionalism in multi-religion teaching and learning merely as *objective* or *neutral*. To some teachers of particular religions, [multi]-religion is in contrast with the faith base of their own religion (Krüger, 2003). Debates in academic environments and the media on the discourses of *neutrality* in religion teaching and learning sometimes also strengthen the arguments of individuals and religious institutions against an inclusive approach to religion teaching and learning, and increase their resistance to such an approach.

Krüger (2003) explains the purpose of the professionalism of the teacher within religion teaching and learning and questions *neutrality* and *objectivity* with regard to *relativism*. If the relativity of truths is not acknowledged, religions and truth orientations can only be studied in terms of a specific cultural context. Furthermore, this denial of the relativity of truths is detrimental to any dialogue. It is therefore also negative for interpretations of texts

or content (hermeneutics). Underlying this is the epistemology of the study of religions and the practice of religion teaching and learning.

If teachers (practitioners) take their responsibilities seriously with regard to the interpretation of the text (curriculum content) as a practical action which is dependent on their interpretation and judgement, they will also take their status in curriculum approach to learners and/or students seriously. Learners will then be regarded as learning partners, and not as learning objects. This means that *learning* and not *teaching* will take the central position. The added value of including students as *active participants* in the construct of learning means that *learning* becomes more meaningful.

A Social-constructivist Curriculum Approach to Religion Teaching and Learning

As previously mentioned, the social-constructivist curriculum approach to religion teaching and learning and the influence of social environments for the development of curriculum theories and strategies are important factors. Intrinsic religious knowledge must be reconstructed in order to attempt to understand diversity and inclusivity within the complexity of the social education environment (Milot, 2006).

In the literature on religion teaching and learning, the terms *multi-religious* and *inter-religious* are used in an ambivalent way (Weisse, 1996a; Weisse 1996b; Andree, Bakker & Schreiner, 1997; Chidester, Stonier & Tobler, 1999). Omar (in Weisse 1996b) argues that in Ninian Smart's (1989) inventory, the various phenomena of religions are interdependent and thus require a multi-religious approach. Knowledge of religions is mastered phenomenologically and not subjectively. The term *multi-religion* thus describes a programme or approach in teaching and learning of various religions and worldviews. Although this approach is phenomenological, one can argue that it can also be reflective, descriptive or interpretive. The religious experiences of the students or learners, however, do not form a part of this approach. One can thus argue that the student teacher or teacher still takes an external position with regard to the *other* religious knowledge.

An *inter-religious* approach to religion teaching and learning reflects an integral involvement of the student's knowledge, perceptions, experiences and reflections, which must form part of the dialogue and discussions. Ethnographic research in religion teaching and learning has shown that the majority of education students come from a mono-religious environment with an extremely limited knowledge of other religions and cultures, which will influence inter-religious conversations in religion teaching and learning within any educational environment. However, the question is: Which facilitation strategies and curriculum approaches can make the most of the students' limited knowledge to enable them to engage in inter-religious dialogue, develop religious literacy and broaden their own religious knowledge? The lecturer's or teacher's facilitation strategies must keep the integration of the variables of the different religions or groups clearly in mind. Bakker states that cultures and religions cannot enter into dialogue with each other, but that only the individuals belonging to the specific traditions and/or cultures can (Bakker in Chidester, Stonier & Tobler, 1999). To address the above problem, *intra-religious* conversations and dialogue should be implemented as a prerequisite for inter-religious dialogue in the educational environment (cf. Roux, 2007c).

Critical pedagogy should thus empower learners/students and teachers/lecturers to discover new environments and apply new actions. Paolo Freire (Grundy, 1987:101) mentions three principles on the basis of which praxis can be put into action:

- The learners/students must be active participants in the learning programme.
- The learning experience must make sense to the learners/students.
- The learners/students must have a critical focus and approach to the learning matter.

In order to accommodate student teachers of the abovementioned university with their different backgrounds and perceptions, a *reflective-dialogical approach*⁸ with a *phenomenological* notion developed as a point of departure for religion teaching and learning. This approach expounds the content optimally for the students and attempts to have them function in the classrooms not as *knowledge conveyers*, but as *knowledge representatives*. The content of the curriculum gains meaning from the initial inputs of the content and the students' reflection of the acquired knowledge rather than from the outcomes that should be achieved. Reflection is encouraged in terms of the students' own interpretation and is measured according to the hermeneutical principles of *action hermeneutics*. Dialogue as strategy is used to investigate and further research unknown concepts which are incorporated into difficult religious concepts. Coherence with the elements of unknown religions is investigated and general existential questions are posed that students should be able to answer confidently. Overlapping actions, ideas and values of the different religions are examined and situated within the social context of the religion and religious community.

This approach initially guides students to study other religious contents *phenomenologically* (factually) before their own perceptions and interpretations can be formed. From a hermeneutical perspective, the student, as an interpreter of the content, makes an *informed decision* regarding the content and reflects on the *realities* of the religious content. An important aspect of this method is that students also investigate their own religions from this curriculum approach and then develop a religious literacy that will enable them to try to understand the social construct. Students must therefore also be able to investigate, interpret and adapt to new situations and understand new experiences. They become active participants in the learning process (Ferguson & Roux, 2003b). This approach has had the effect that the potential to establish transformation is encouraged in students' thoughts on religious diversity within an atmosphere of critical discourse and confrontation with all facets of religious diversity. This includes conflict areas and misperceptions. This approach supports the hermeneutical frame of reference in which religion teaching and learning should function.

A Future Perspective on Religion Teaching and Learning within Social Constructivism

The growing awareness of diversity in religious environments, the secularisation of cultures in Europe, the Anglo-Saxon world, Asia, and Australasia, and the experience in South Africa bring a new dimension of research in religion teaching and learning to the fore. The challenges that are starting to crystallise now indicate that the politicising of religious environments and traditions within education urgently needs to be investigated and addressed. The question is through which medium religion teaching and learning will be able to function more positively in a less politicised manner, but within the social construct. The Bill of Rights (1996), together with its support by many countries (cf. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948) provides a new medium to approach religious diversity from the human rights perspective and principles and to facilitate religious diversity in educational environments from that perspective. The growing influence of secularisation on the broad social environ-

⁸ This term is described as a "reflective dialogical approach with phenomenological notions, towards gaining knowledge on religions other than their own" (Roux, 2006c; 2007c).

ments, together with globalisation, has a direct impact on religion teaching and learning. It seems that social environments are becoming more secularised and humanistic. At the same time a growing consciousness is developing of aspects of human rights which lead to religious and cultural traditions being questioned and/or protected. Individual rights and practices of religions as well as traditional cultural practices are increasingly being discussed in academic debates (Gearson, 2002). One can argue that the polarisation of these two environments can be averted by a concerted effort to establish *religious literacy* and *human rights literacy* as important components in religion teaching and learning (Roux, Du Preez & Ferguson, 2007).

The growing secular thinking and globalisation also question the relevance of religion teaching and learning in teacher training. International debates on the relevance of religion teaching and learning within the social construct place human rights directly within the context of religious and cultural diversity. The contextualisation and politicising of religions as a result of world events affect core human rights issues and open up new fields of research. Colleagues and students at various South African universities are currently participating in an international research project and forum where religious, cultural and human rights literacy (Roux, Smith, Ferguson, Du Preez, Small & Jarvis, 2005; 2006) represents a new dimension within the educational context. A further aspect is the growing number of non-religious students and learners in educational environments, which compels a renewed critical reflection and secular understanding of spirituality within the diverse social and economic environments, both locally and internationally. On the one hand, the growing number of non-religious learners cannot be alienated for the sake of the concept of religious diversity and inclusivity; on the other hand, the basic rights of association and cultural and religious freedom of individuals and groups must be protected and supported. This ambivalence is a challenge and a sensitisation to protect individual rights at all costs. Educational environments are forced to enter into these debates of human and religious rights in religion teaching and learning, and to research this terrain so that dialogue and discourse between world opinions, religions and cultures can be promoted.

Conclusion

Religion teaching and learning in the South African context cannot be altered by introducing teachers who were previously trained within a mono-religious paradigm, to multi-religion programmes. It is vital, at the outset, for students and teachers alike to understand the philosophy of hermeneutics and the arguments of action hermeneutics within social constructivism in order to implement and facilitate a curriculum that needs skilled teachers.

Society is subjected to printed media reports and television programmes that show how brutal people often are towards one another. Religious fundamentalism poses a crucial educational question that needs to be answered by all religion educators throughout the world: Can educators and religious leaders still ignore the opportunities for the next generation to receive basic information and knowledge about religions and worldviews other than their own? One should therefore argue against Küng's (1995) supposition of the influence of religions' aggressive truth claims by maintaining that religion teaching and learning within a social-constructivist curriculum, based on action hermeneutical principles and human rights values, have the propensity to promote respect for diversity. From the above argument, one can conclude the notion that unity does not exclude diversity, because without diversity there can be no true and complete unity.

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