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## Sacred Spaces, Rituals and Texts in European Teacher Education. The Rationale behind the SpiRiTEx-Project.

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# Sacred Spaces, Rituals and Texts in European Teacher Education. The Rationale behind the SpiRiTEx-Project

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## Abstract

The spiritual capital of Europe is waiting to be rediscovered in new and exciting ways by future generations. The conception of the European “project” since the Second World War formulated by the Czech novelist Milan Kundera – “maximum diversity on minimum space” – encompasses not only linguistic and cultural but also spiritual challenges. Today this multilayered project is accelerated by migration, mobility and the virtual extension of space and time. Teacher students in RE find themselves in the ambivalent position of spontaneously participating in the European project, but lacking the hermeneutical keys to unlock it for the RE classroom of the future. The SpiRiTEx-project aims at supporting them by exploring with them concrete sacred spaces, rituals and texts as resources for RE. Through fieldwork RE teacher students will have the opportunity to reconsider the religious landscape in Europe from a “cosmopolitan” point of view. This paper lays out the theoretical underpinnings, more specifically with respect to the context, the scientific orientation and the concretization of the project. New pedagogies and theologies will possibly emerge out of this explorative approach to RE in European schools today.

**Keywords:** religious education, cosmopolitanism, inter-worldview education, field research, transformation of religion, sacred space, pilgrimage, Europe

## 1. Introduction

It goes without saying that economic and social justice, implemented by politics and civil society, form the necessary conditions for a healthy and prosperous European

living environment. Many efforts still need to be made in this respect – for the benefit of residents and newcomers alike. However, one may not forget that there is something substantial that Europe can offer her citizens too. The spiritual resources of the old continent can provide “soul food” for the enthusiastic European citizen of the future and can help him/her to deal with the ongoing complexity of the European and global society and to “grow in shared humanity” (Roebben, 2016, pp. 43-61). The vision of Jacques Delors, president of the European Commission from 1985 to 1995, in “The treasure within: Learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be” (Delors, 2013) deeply resonates with this idea.

In this paper the educational project SpiRiTEx is presented. Its aim is to create powerful learning environments with student teachers in religious education (RE) in order to discover the spiritual capital of Europe. Through specific field work experiences they can learn to perceive, understand and communicate the importance of sacred spaces, texts and rituals for the spiritual well-being of children and young people in schools in Europe tomorrow. The basic assumption of the project is that these three spiritual sources can become vital re-sources, when they are re-created, re-defined and re-appropriated in the very act of learning. New patterns of meaning and behavior can arise out of the confrontation with these sources.

The hypothesis behind the project is that RE student teachers, who themselves are not socialized in a specific religious tradition can become cooperative agents in the project. They can contribute to a new disclosure of sacred space, ritual and text. They can create new spiritual meaning out of the disclosure, together with their peers who are explicitly or tacitly socialized in a specific religious tradition. Based on the concept of “normative professionalization” (Bakker & van der Zande, 2017) every future teacher can and should be trained in becoming aware of his/her personal and spiritual preferences and commitments with respect to the RE teaching job. The project could possibly provide with a strong learning environment to articulate this commitment (subjectively), to exchange (inter-subjectively) thoughts with fellow students and to contribute creatively to new interpretations of the (objectively) given space, text and ritual which they are encountering. It all boils down to a solid didactical concept, to a specific didachè or way to address the topic of sacred space, ritual and text in ways that are hermeneutically “irritative” and thought-provocative.

The research aim of the project is in this respect double: (1) to understand hermeneutically the transformation of sacred space, ritual and text in its actualized representations and in its potential transformations and (2) to re-produce this tension didactically into new patterns of religious and theological education. The project starts with the rather evident element of sacred space, because it is hard to overlook the omnipresence

of religious buildings in the European landscape. In every village, town and city the testimonials of a glorious religious past can be found and discovered, not only in building blocks, but also in the “living stones” of ordinary people, dealing with the past, the presence and the future of these places. It is remarkable to observe, argues the German religious educationalist Kim de Wildt, that contemporary secularized (young) people in Europe still experience the need for sacred places (de Wildt, 2017). There is empirical evidence, that “even in our modern secularized society, churches seem to be atmospheric locations, eager to offer comfort and recreation for visitors. Churches still perform as special places, prompting positive feelings in the vast majority of visitors – even in those who were not educated religiously in their family or do not even belong to the relevant religious community” (Kindermann & Riegel, 2018, p. 145). The issue now is that people transform those “places” into sacred “spaces” in order to meet explicitly their spiritual needs for silence and self-transcendence (de Wildt, 2017, p. 337). The tension between place and space leads us to the heart of the matter, to what is hermeneutically-educationally at stake in the SpiRiTEx-project. The Dutch theologian Inigo Bocken clarifies this tension as follows: “Place is the category that is entwined with strategy as involving a fixed structure. A place is always static and identity-forming, referring to a fixed order that is imposed from above: place belongs the dimension of the engineer-urbanite who draws a town plan on his drawing board. Space, on the other hand, refers to people’s concrete dealings with place, the cluttered mish-mash of actions taking place amongst fixed places and structures and inevitably escaping any kind of control” (Bocken, 2017, p. 16).

Spatial concepts in RE “concern the way in which specific places become imbued with particular social, symbolic and religious meanings as well as the way in which the meanings and representations of certain places are contested, negotiated, and transformed through individual and collective action” (Rothgangel, von Brömssen, Heimbrock & Skeie, 2017, pp. 7-8). Until now this “spatial turn” has not taken place in RE yet, the same authors argue. The SpiRiTEx-project aims to begin this turn, not in theory, but in praxis through field research with future RE-teachers (based on observation, logbook entries and interviews). The three years (2018-2020) project is based, prepared, executed, evaluated and investigated at the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Bonn. In this paper (1) the context, (2) the scientific orientation and (3) the concretization of the project are discussed, respectively with a cultural-hermeneutical [“cosmopolitan RE”], a methodological [“learning in the presence of the other”] and an educational-didactical [“spiritual learning”] lens. Final reflections about the professionalization of the RE teacher conclude the paper.

## 2. Contextualization of the project – RE in the European learning space

The young inhabitants of the modern (virtual) city find themselves in a permanent state of cross-fertilization: between self and other, familiar and strange, nearby and far away, local and global, real time and virtual, etcetera. In the mind set of many of them this list, including the vague “etcetera”, is endless and the developmental task to live happily accordingly is a struggle. Education should be seen as a comprehensive support system that offers existential orientation in this struggle. RE with its many specific provisions throughout Europe has an important role to play in this respect. But the critical issue is that even in RE, a school subject that has always been considered as sustainable and stable, things are dramatically changing as well. Religious and non-religious worldviews can be found these days “all over the place”, in negative or positive representations, in highly outspoken and provocative or unarticulated and undifferentiated forms. The “semantic potential”, so Jürgen Habermas, of religious and non-religious traditions is at everybody’s disposal – on the street, in the newspaper, on the (not always so) ‘social’ media. Children and young people do pick up these things effortlessly and often remain unsure about what to do with it (Roebben, 2016, pp. 2-5).

The RE of the future will not only need to inform young people about different (religious and non-religious) orientations in life, but will also need to make them capable of understanding these orientations in dialogue with others and helping them with appropriating them in their own biographies. And for sure, new narrative patchwork identities arise out of this process in the virtual city. Not only churches and faith communities but also political institutions and civil society are highly aware of this educational challenge for Europe (Schreiner, 2012). Since 9/11 an encouraging pan-European synergy has been taking place between policy making and scholarly work to clarify this issue (Jackson, 2014b). After the Council of Europe Conference in Oslo 2004 on the religious dimension of intercultural education (Keast, 2007) the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (2007) saw the light. The didactical transformation of this vision in Signposts (Jackson, 2014a) has been widely spread and implemented in schools. This document clearly states that RE is more than just providing information: “in relation to religions, it is not sufficient to teach about the history of religions (...). Religion is not restricted to practices, artifacts and buildings. It is also necessary (...) to understand the meaning of religious language, including expressions of their beliefs, values and emotions” (Jackson, 2014a, p. 15) – and this is also the case for non-religious belief systems. Even in countries with a so called impartial or non-sectarian multi-faith approach to RE the conviction is that young people

need more than just solid information (Roebben, 2016, pp. 74-76). They want to see the different life options and orientations in action, they want to talk about them and experience them. RE should therefore be comprehensively “narrative, communicative and spiritual” (Roebben, 2016, p. 25).

Churches have lost their monopoly as providers of meaning. Without an explicit religious socialization, “finding religion in everyday life” (Ammerman, 2014) has become a spiritual developmental task for many millennials today, including RE student teachers. It belongs to the personal freedom of the future teacher to connect this search with a specific tradition and to question whether or not he/she is prepared to bear witness to it. So, the pressure of being a person of faith, participating explicitly in the life of the church, can no longer be justified in the framework of a RE teacher education institution. But the fact that the RE teacher has a public role to fulfill when addressing children and young people in issues of morality, life stance and worldview implies that he/she is trained in the above mentioned “normative professionalization”. Religious and non-religious worldview instances can be of value here if they focus on their core business: offering ritual lab-space for future teachers, where they can learn to “play” performatively and reflectively with religious practices, doing justice to the traditional sources where these practices come from (de Groot 2018).

In line with the work of the American philosopher of education David T. Hansen one could call the form of RE that arises out of this RE teacher education “cosmopolitan” (Hansen, 2011). It consists of “reflective openness to the new and reflective loyalty to the old” (Hansen, 2009, p. 137) – searching deep in the existing local provisions of RE and retrieving the creative power of their underlying traditions, when one digs with young people in the RE classroom into the “spiritual capital” of these provisions. Cosmopolitan RE tries “to metabolize the new into the known, such that the latter itself takes on new qualities” (Hansen, 2011, p. 8). It tries to develop new insights with young people, in such a way that the old concepts take on new qualities and become meaningful in ever shifting contexts. The SpiRiTEx-project is rooted in this hermeneutical-educational vision and aims at providing empirical evidence for this vision.

### **3. Orientation of the project – inter-worldview, inter-disciplinary, inter-contextual**

Methodologically the project strives at intensifying the hermeneutical communication between future RE teachers, the rich European “traditions of openness” (Borgman, 2004) and the people of teacher education departments involved in the project. It

also strives at creating together with all the parties a didactical concept that takes into account the variety of worldviews, disciplines and context. These methodological decisions will have a strong impact on the ways in which the project will be executed and researched in the field.

The inter-worldview orientation is based on the assumption that the “teachable moment” in dealing with religious and non-religious convictions occurs at its best in the interpersonal encounter within specific places (space), through specific readings (text) and performances (ritual). “Learning in the presence of the other” (Roebben, 2016, pp. 51-55) presupposes hermeneutic-irritating settings, in which the complexity is not reduced but stirred up, in which people feel at first instance disoriented but then excited about finding solutions and explanations in the inner dialogue with themselves and in the encounter with others. This is especially the case when these spaces (Bettin, 2015), texts (Welling & Roebben, 2018) and rituals (de Wildt, 2014; Moyaert, 2018) have lost their immediate meaning for contemporary secularized learners. Transformative learning then takes place, not only in the mind of the students, but also in the mind of the teachers and in the curriculum at stake: “Objects are ‘runaway objects’, never fixed and open to change. In a setting of religious education this means that the object, what we perhaps could call ‘students’ religious understanding’ is never fixed. It changes as a result of the processes in the activity system. An interesting conflict arises when there is a contradiction between new objects and old tools” (Afdal, 2010, p. 55). When worldviews are exchanged intensively, people and objects change as well.

The inter-disciplinary orientation refers to the broad spectrum of disciplines involved in the project: education, theology, cultural studies, media studies, ritual studies, literature, architecture, arts, etc. On top of this, the challenge for the learners will be to perceive how space is filled with texts and rituals, how texts are ritualized in space, and how rituals are the spatial enactments of texts. The deep discovery of meaning of a sacred text in the embodied presence of others implies a specific conception of sacred space and sacred ritual. The imaginable interconnections are without limits. In the first stage of the project the focus will be on the theme of sacred space. Two spatial-educational concepts will be of great importance: the pedagogy of sacred space (“Kirchenpädagogik”, according to Rupp, 2005, and “Sakralraumpädagogik”, according to Leimgruber, 2007, pp. 78-79; de Wildt 2015) and the pedagogy of pilgrimage (Jirasek, 2014; Roebben, 2016, pp. 25-42; Sagberg, 2017). Special attention will be given to the complex relationship of the two (Sheldrake, 2001; Brown, 2004). Too much fixation namely on sacred space (e.g. a church, a mosque or a synagogue) as the “place of definition” in the city could actually run “counter to any meaningful definition for the city in itself” (Sheldrake, 2001, p. 149). Space is always found in context, a building

is always surrounded by neighborhoods. People do not live permanently in churches for instance; they go in and out and they live their daily lives in relationship to the life of the church. They are rather “at home on the road” than at home in the sacred space.

I already mentioned the flexibility of the postmodern learner. In his/her effort to deal with sacred space in relationship to daily life “in the city” the learner should therefore best be conceived of as a pilgrim. “The mode of pilgrimage is not represented by visiting a place with religious context, but by a journey marked by the courage to be oneself, by focusing on the spiritual aspects of the verticality of human existence, by meaningfulness of life (including the meaningfulness of the journey). The pilgrim can travel in both a religious and non-religious context – what matters is the spiritual height of ideals and the depth of thoughts, openness to the visited places, a sincere and open-minded relationship to the fellow pilgrims” (Jirasek, 2015, p. 51). This will result in a dynamic-creative learning process: “What it may witness to is a deep-seated human intuition that present placedness only becomes fully worthwhile and intelligible if it is set in a larger context, and for that to happen a spiritual journey is necessary, with the journey itself an indispensable part of the learning process” (Brown, 2005, p. 232). An interesting new connection has been developed by architects who re-invigorate traditional sacred spaces by re-framing them into the larger contexts of contemporary life worlds. These people literally are “reading between the lines” (see the example below) and are creating permeability so that sacred and profane, young and old, nature and culture, past and future, real and virtual world can meet in new and exciting ways.

The inter-contextual orientation of the project refers to the previous observation. When people are “at home on the road” as pilgrims, seeking sense in the city and hoping to find orientation for their complex (read: vulnerable and heterogeneous) lives, the challenge will be to re-contextualize the sacred space with them in a vibrant variety of representations. According to Richard Sennett this participative and flexible approach to religion (e.g. Christianity) as “a religion of pilgrimage and dislocation rather than placement” (Sheldrake, 2001, p. 149) will result in new encounters in which “the spiritual value of diversity” (ibid.) will not be denied but encouraged. “The truly human city is where (...) the streets are still walked in ways that lack normally defined functionality and non-planned space invites the creativity present in a multitude of human possibilities” (Sheldrake, 2001, p. 162). Explorative learning will then take place. The hypothesis behind the project is that future RE teachers could possibly re-create the meaning of sacred space, when they deal inter-contextually with the future of the religious past, in conversation with fellow learners and with respect to the development of their “normative professionalization”, even though their link to traditional religious institutions is possibly rather loose. Precisely in their approach of sacred

space as “believers without belonging” (Davie, 1990) they are free to rethink and reshape the spiritual heritage in a variety of ways. One of the central questions of the project is therefore how this explorative learning can happen successfully, namely how to “liquefy” or “de-congeal” (Roebben, 2013, p. 120) the “spiritual capital” (Flanagan & O’Sullivan, 2012) of sacred space with teacher students and how to interpret the transformations that are taking place with them. What happens when they conceive of spiritual questions in the presence of others and in the context of traditional sacred spaces (such as a church, a temple, a mosque), although lacking religious mother tongues and inventing other languages and expanding sacred space through new media, performing arts, music, dance, sports, etcetera? (Nicolas & Braun, 2018).

#### 4. Concretization of the project – pedagogical implementation, didactical concretization and theological reflection

In the following schema the argumentation of the paper is summarized and reorganized with a view on concrete pedagogical and didactical steps in the execution of the project:

Table 1. Theological reflection – spiritual theology

Scientific orientation	Pedagogical implementation	Didactical concretization
Inter-worldview approach	Transformative learning	Learning at home on the road through artifacts/ pilgrimage, with teachers as researchers
Inter-disciplinary approach	Dynamic-creative learning	
Inter-contextual approach	Explorative learning	

The SpiRiTex-project will accumulate new knowledge on RE teacher education by actually inviting RE student teachers to participate, to perform, to deliver thick descriptions and to conceptualize what they have experienced and learned “at home on the road”. This will mainly happen through field work (based on observation, logbook entries and interviews). Artifacts (in the first pilot project the focus will be on religious place and its transformations into sacred space) will be explored in the set-up of a pilgrimage through Flanders (the Northern part of Belgium) in May 2018. The fluidity of

being at home on the road will be mirrored in the places to be visited. For instance, the Magdalena-church in Bruges (Yot, 2018) is a hospitable place for people of all kinds of (religious and non-religious) worldview backgrounds and with all kinds of existential questions. The church is considered not to be a church for “seeing”, but for “doing”, a space in which worshipping people can discover performatively new rituals, gestures and words, however always linked to the Christian tradition. The “Kapel van de ontluiking” (Centrum voor religieuze kunst en cultuur, 2018) is another splendid example of how a religious institution (the La Salle Brothers in Groot-Bijgaarden, close to Brussels) has reframed its tradition as “soul food” for spiritual seekers who come by and visit them. The designed ambivalence of the place contributes to the revelation of its sacredness. White panels can be unfolded to make the windows in stained glass visible and approachable for the pilgrim, but can also be closed again and conceal its background in order to make the pilgrim start from scratch or to stir up his/her imagination in new ways. The Archdaily price winner of the worldwide best sacral building in 2012, called “Reading between the lines” (2018), in the hills of Borgloon, is a third example of how pilgrims articulate sacred space, in coming together and creating a new “ecclesia” of transparency and vision for the future.

In the three examples the sources of lived religion can become re-sources for transformative, dynamic-creative and explorative learning. Following Kim de Wildt (2015, p. 94), the sacred space can evolve into a sacred “learning” space, when people learn from each other as meaningful others, communicate and authenticate their newly found insights in each other’s presence and ascribe these insights to the place they discover on their pilgrimage in life. The above mentioned examples are creative re-conceptualizations of sacred space in their relationship to environment and context. These are spaces waiting “out there” to be discovered in transformative, dynamic-creative and explorative ways of learning “in here”, by walking and reaching out and by reflecting and taking in.

The didactical concretization of the project is work in progress. The specific didactical literature still needs to be written. It will be as such one of the sub-outcomes of the project. Tools and instruments are provided in popular educational literature, but a coherent didactical concept is lacking and will need to be constructed step by step during the first field trip. Of course, the above mentioned German concept of “Sakral-raumpädagogik” (pedagogy of sacred space), alongside with performative and aesthetic pedagogies, will provide participants with helpful insights and practices, but – as was argued before – the relationship with the context and the experiences of “lived faith” of the participants-as-pilgrims still needs to be addressed and investigated. Bettin (2015), Della Dora (2011) and Kindermann & Riegel (2018) point moreover to the necessity of a larger didactical framework to integrate the field trip: “effective field trips have

to be integrated into a whole instructional sequence, preparing the pupils for the field trip and reflecting the experiences during this trip afterwards” (Kindermann & Riegel, 2018, p. 145). Della Dora offers first elements for a curriculum of sacred space: “first, to acquaint the students with current debates and theories on sacred space; second, to critically evaluate merits and limits of each through field practice and third, to help them to go beyond these approaches and specific sites and think about new ways and vocabularies to theorize sacred space“ (Della Dora, 2011, p. 164). After evaluation of the pilot project in Flanders new trips will be planned in the following years (e.g. the middle Rhine-valley and Cologne, Prague, etc.) and the scope will be expanded in the direction of more (religious and non-religious) diversity with regard to the participants and their respective spaces, texts and rituals.

It goes without saying that this kind of participatory learning can and should result in participatory research. Future RE teachers can and should learn to understand themselves as teacher-researchers (Bakker & Heimbrock, 2007; Stern, 2016) – educationally and theologically – as part of their development as normative professionals. First of all educationally: during the project the professional habitus of the teacher will be put to the test and will need to be reflected afterwards. According to the German RE researcher Stefan Heil this habitus includes three elements: “(1) a case specific transformation of (2) a repertoire in substance, which then (3) is leading in a specific relational context to an appropriate solution” (Roebben, 2016, pp. 116-118). Adapted to the SpiRiTEx-project this means: the professional teacher knows how to (1) concretely and flexibly (2) open up the sacred space for (3) a concrete encounter of a community of learners with and within this space – and in doing so, reaches a common and new insight together with this learning community.

Secondly, this professional disposition of the RE teacher is especially contested in the field of RE – and more specifically in RE “fieldwork” such as in this project – by the issue of “belonging” to or “witnessing” of a religious tradition. How to transmit religious content (space, ritual, text) authentically and communicatively without being embedded in religious community? As was argued before this issue is one of the central hypotheses of the project and as such one of the intriguing research questions accompanying the project: how do future RE teachers, who are part of millennial culture, struggle with the transformation of religion in everyday life, how are they attentive to the spiritual developmental task of discovering meaning within this complexity and of creating didactical support for this task? The only educational approach that seems to be valuable here is the combination of a performative (see above) and a reflective one (Pirner, 2012), which according to the German religious educationalist Thomas Schlag implies a “double subjectification”: what is expected from young people in the

classroom should also be expected to be part of the developing educational habitus of the teacher (Schlag, 2012, p. 258). Theologically this disposition can be considered as spiritual: learning to understand, to reflect and to evaluate one's own spiritual biography (Pirner, 2012, p. 120) in the presence of meaningful others and in the light of a personal spiritual journey (Altmeyer & Woppowa, 2006; Gellel, 2010; Caloun & Habringer-Hagleiter, 2018) – here intensified through meaningful landscapes (Štěch, 2017), through sacred space and pilgrimage. Based on the model of theological action research (Cameron, 2010) new theologies can emerge out of the project, radically open for inter-collegial interpretation. The assumption is that spiritual learning-on-the-road will result in new forms of spiritual theology. The teacher-pilgrim will be invited to reconsider his/her professional theology in the light of the journey. In this respect he/she will be a permanent learner alongside his/her students in the RE classroom.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to create a comprehensive framework for transformative learning in RE in the midst of a European continent in motion – socially, culturally and spiritually. The religious heritage of the continent is waiting to be explored on the basis of a transformative, “cosmopolitan” concept of RE. Future teachers are the main actors in this exploration. By visiting iconic places within changing landscapes, being open for new experiences on the journey, they will “learn by doing” what it means to be a pilgrim in life. It is my contention that this kind of spiritual learning (for their own profit and later transferred to the RE classroom) will generate new spiritual theologies. It implies the risky receptivity for what the next generation of RE teachers has to offer to the academic discipline of RE – based on their experiences in the field, walking with them through the landscape, listening with them to the voices of the past and to their vision for the future. The SpiRiTEx-project aims at gathering hermeneutical insights and didactical outlooks for this journey. In future papers the results of the pilot project of 2018 and the follow-up projects in 2019 and 2020 will be documented and discussed.

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