DEATH: A CENTRAL THEME IN RELIGIOUS SOCIALIZATION

Summary

The question, which this article deals with, is whether or not, and if so, to what extent religious socialization succeeded or failed. It focuses on the belief of life after death, which is an exemplary theme, that belongs to the very core of the Christian faith. Several religious-thanatological approaches within this belief are empirically investigated, like for instance the teleology, interaction, intervention, rising, deism, agnosticism, immanentism, and reincarnation models. A considerable number of factors within religious socialization, which may influence the belief in life after death, are taken into consideration, as for example parents' religiosity, religious communication in the family, religious education in school, and the influence on the level of religious knowledge. The research result is that religious socialization is a key factor in causing both the presence and (!) absence of this belief, but that the influence of the cultural context may not be overlooked: it plays an important role as well. The research population is an aselect sample, which is drawn from the student population of Nijmegen University in The Netherlands.

In this article I would like to discuss a theme with the help of which I will be able to formulate some fundamental problems with regard to religious socialization. This theme is death. The question which I will discuss reads as follows: what is the effect of religious socialization on the religious meaning of death? I understand religious socialization in terms of religious education in the family and in school. In other words: to what extent does the older generation succeed in handing on the religious meaning of death to the younger one? There are some indications that this question might involve some problems, at least in the Netherlands. For instance, the percentage of Dutch church members who believe in life after death decreased between 1966 and 1991 from 83% to 69% (Sociaal en cultureel rapport 1992, 458).

I would like to structure this article in four parts. First of all I will formulate the question whether the religious meaning of death can function as exemplary for religion in general and more specifically for religious socialization (1). Further, I will explore the question of the effect of religious socialization on death. In order to do so, I'll try to find out what attitudes a specific group of young people, namely university students, possess with regard to the religious meaning of death. To that end I will use the results of an empirical-
theological research project that was conducted among students of the Catholic University in Nijmegen in 1990. In comparison with other youngsters, these students received the most extensive religious socialization ever (2). After that I will go into the factors of family and in school, that contributed to the development of those attitudes (3). Finally, I will try to answer the question about the significance of the research results for the development of ecclesiastical and pastoral policy (4).

1. Death: an exemplary theme?

First, I'll ask the question whether taking the theme of death as exemplary for religious socialization can be justified. Let us assume that the effect of religious socialization on death is negative. If faith in life after death belongs to the core of the Christian faith, there is reason to be worried about it. If this faith belongs to the periphery of the Christian faith, there is, perhaps, no severe problem.

1.1 Faith in life after death and the core of Christianity

In the sixties and seventies, some theologians put faith in life after death in perspective. They stressed the fact that, in the Bible, this faith only developed in later years. In connection with that, they paid attention to the textual phenomenon, that the Bible, when dealing with life after death, is not concerned with giving information or dogmatic certainty about whatever man can expect after death. In the Bible faith in life after death is the expression of an aspiration, a longing, a hunger (Blenkinsopp 1970, 11). Some theologians were of the opinion that a person ‘who is convinced that he can trust God, in fact accepts the core of the Christian faith, although he might have doubts about life after death’ (Schillebeeckx 1970, 434). Other theologians pointed at the discussion between the Pharisees, who accepted the resurrection, and the Sadducees, who rejected it. Against this background, some theologians interpreted the oldest eucharistic theology, which can be found in 1 Cor. 11,24-26. The apostle speaks of the commemoration of Jesus’ death, without explicitly referring to the Lord’s living presence after his death. From this perspective the question is, whether there is room, not only for pharisaic Christians but also for sadducaic Christians (Schoonenberg 1969, 81; Logister 1988).

In the eighties, too, some voices made themselves heard in order to put faith in life after death in perspective. Some theologians went even further. They were of the opinion that it was preferable to put faith in life after death between brackets. By doing so the attention of the faithful could be reoriented from life after death, to life here on earth. That could provide the