

## Faithful Efforts



BRAM DE MUYNCK AND ROEL KUIPER (eds.)

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Education, Formation, and the Church

Summum

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## Introduction

BRAM DE MUYNCK AND ROEL KUIPER

This book brings together selected lectures presented at the *Education, Formation and the Church* conference held in Kampen on 30 and 31 August 2018. The aim of the conference was to provide a platform for academics and professionals to think about formation processes in Christian churches and schools. The urgency of the topic is experienced by many people committed to the faith development of children and young people. Changes in society bring uncertainty and anxiety to churches, schools and families. Some Christian communities are inclined to protect their members from the perceived negative influences of the post-Christian age, while others equip them with tools to become virtuous disciples of Christ in modern society. These all are faithful efforts that seek the best for the future generation. Different responses to the challenges in society affect the various contexts in which formation is at stake, including schools, youth work, catechism and the training of pastors.

During the conference, scholars working in the domains of education and practical theology shared their perspectives, and we discovered that the disciplines have much to learn from each other. This is not surprising, as they have common interests. Believers who promote formation in different contexts belong to the worldwide *ecclesia* of Christ, and the young people they work for also belong or are invited to that *ecclesia*. This ecclesiastical perspective does not restrict the formation issue to the developmental processes of individuals. According to Paul's epistle to Ephesus, the formation process matters to the church as a whole and therefore has to be seen as a collective phenomenon. Formation takes place for the 'edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the fulness of Christ' (Ephesus 4: 12–13). The collective ideal provide the motivation for all the material presented in this book.

We intentionally placed the keyword of the title, *formation*, in its centre because we wanted to stress to focus on the processes that aim to

come in the direction of the afore mentioned ideal. Formation towards the fulness of Christ ought to be furthered by such endeavours as education, preaching, catechism, and youth work. We assume that there is much overlap between formation processes in schools and churches and that the ends to which teachers and church leaders strive have a great deal in common. The collective ideal diminishes the significance of adjectives that could be used to precise formation; distinctions are made between spiritual formation, moral formation, personhood formation, identity formation, character formation, and so on, all of which indicate an aspect of the formation process being studied. We do not problematize this variety of terms but use formation as a tentative concept that unites the interests of actors in Churches and schools. The aim of the conference was to create an open context in which participants could reflect using their own terminology. We sometimes speak of formation and sometimes of faith formation. We do not restrict the meaning of formation to the development of young people but also include professional formation in theological seminaries. The last three chapters of this book strongly emphasize the latter.

In the book, when we speak about schools, we mean primary and secondary schools; that is, schools that operate from a Christian foundation, some with strong relationships to the Church and others that are run as independent bodies.

The key issue tackled by all contributors was how we can properly understand formation in the formative contexts of school and Church.

*Bram de Muynck* (chapter 1) starts with the observation that there are many family, school and Church factors that influence the development of young people. In a context dominated by digital media, the configuration of these domains differs significantly from a few decades ago. He argues that for contemporary faith formation, there is an urgent need to distinguish between the environment and the developing person as the main actor in the formation process. Formation is not the work of a potter but the unique response to stimuli in the environment. Religious educators need to take into account an active hermeneutic space more than before and challenge and feed it with thorough knowledge content, without the pretence of controlling the formation.

*Trevor Cooling* (chapter 2) provides us with a treatise on the nature of Christian learning. He notices that many teachers feel that they have to impart Christian truths, while their pedagogical intuition tells them that learning is a matter of inquisitive discovery. Cooling shows that this contradiction is unnecessary if one takes a critically realistic position in



which one accepts the proper authority of Holy Scripture and realises that learning always requires a hermeneutic that includes personal responsibility. Christian learning thus involves both listening to an authoritative voice and profound hermeneutical competence. Helping teachers to look at learning in this way solves their dilemma without having to give up a conservative faith. At the same time, it encourages students to become wise interpreters.

Similar to Cooling, *David I. Smith* (chapter 3) points out that the transmission of truths floats away from the broad scope of Christian faith. Using four examples, he shows the necessity of paying attention to the pedagogical design of the learning environment. A faith formation curriculum should be regarded as more than just a sequence of topics to be covered; it should consist of a complex environmental design in which all aspects of the environment are considered. The material and symbolic resources and aesthetic and temporal patterns that shape the learning experience should be part of the design.

*Berndt Wannenwetsch* (chapter 4) approaches faith formation from an entirely different perspective. Starting with Psalm 78, he criticizes current conceptions of formation. He understands formation as a neo-Aristotelian approach to virtue that responds to the dominant liberal paradigm. Due to its strong popularisation, from corporations to theology, formation has acquired a strategic connotation. He presents an alternative paradigm based on Psalm 78, which helps conceptualize formation in a new way. Whereas, in the neo-Aristotelian approach, formation is strongly related to the *polis*, in traditioning, the *torah* is the frame of reference. In the Greek approach, the aim of formation is always the survival of the polis. Virtues are always 'armed'; they help to defend the polis. This is not the case with the Torah, which is the living word that comes from the outside, is always liberating and ensures that the new generation puts its hope in God. Traditioning thus makes room for a liberating discontinuity in which the present generation must expose the new generation to the active power of the living word but does not want to take control of the formation process.

The following three chapters deal with formation as it takes place in the context of training ministers. *Hans Schaeffer* (chapter 5) addresses the need for formation in the education of future ministers within Christian communities because of the disbalance he perceives between knowledge, theological reflection and spiritual formation. He explains how three dilemmas in theological education are at stake: whether spiritual formation is manageable; to what degree embeddedness in church practices

and academic reflection are contradictory; and whether theology is about content or method. This article opens up a new way of thinking through formation for ministry from the angle of liturgical formation as a possible way to deal with the three dilemmas noted.

*Maarten Kater* (chapter 6) discusses the background of the expression *lex orandi, lex credendi* and the importance of a proper understanding of it in theological education. Beyond its meaning, the linguistic and historical connotations of this Latin phrase suggest that how you pray reveals what you believe. The expression is sometimes interpreted as a normative sequence in the formation of doctrine. The doctrine reflects church practices. The author's interpretation of the Letter to the Hebrews shows that this stance is problematic. What one believes can potentially correct liturgical practices. It is interesting how the theme relates to the formation of individuals and groups through the evaluation of habits, rituals and liturgies, which are at the centre of reflections on how people worship (think of the work of James K Smith, also referred to in chapters 1, 2, 5 and 8).

*Ferdi Kruger's* contribution (chapter 7) also deals with the formation of students at theological institutions, but unlike Kater, instead of Church history, he consults educational science. He attempts to use the concepts of attitude, cognition and perception to provide insights into how formation processes work. He places these educational views against the background of new developments in education, which can be placed under the heading 'transformative education', and uses psychological insights from Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget, for example, emphasised that, based on their experiences, learners constantly reorganise their existing cognitive schemas. Teachers are wise to actively engage students in education to enable them to make adjustments to their schemas.

*Roel Kuiper* (chapter 8) discusses a new perspective: formation as socialization. Preparing students for their role in society is a felt obligation for schools and also for churches. Since we are members of society we need social education. Christian schools have seen this as part of their biblical teaching about the 'cultural mandate'. Herman Bavinck once remarked that 'justice and love are of more worth for society than knowledge'. Active citizenship should not be far away from the curriculum of Christian schools. Civic attitudes, however, are formed in and through practices. Schools can relate their educational approach to practices that serve the common good. In this process personal values and good behavior are stimulated. Schools need to create a shared repertoire of

ideas, concepts, routines, stories, symbols, actions to train their students. Moral and cultural formation will help them to see their public role and serve in the world out there.

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