

# VU Research Portal

## **Korean Christian Religious Education and the Hermeneutics of Action: Nurturing Intergenerational Relationships**

Won, Shin-Ae

2007

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Won, S.-A. (2007). *Korean Christian Religious Education and the Hermeneutics of Action: Nurturing Intergenerational Relationships*. [PhD-Thesis – Research external, graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]. Paul Rho.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

## SUMMARY

Although this dissertation is situated within the field of Christian Religious Education, it is interdisciplinary in its form and its content. Its suggestions for changes in the field are also of an interdisciplinary nature.

The dissertation provides a historical overview and analysis of the state of Christian Religion Education in South Korea, and offers proposals for its betterment. Such proposals are at once linked to changes outside the discipline, as one would expect given the nature of education. The proposed changes to Korean Christian Religious Education have the change to positively impact on a variety of aspects of Korean society, and the dissertation examines how such proposals could be applied to a significant problem in Korean society; namely, the generation gap.

This dissertation primarily addresses those Korean Religious Educators working in theology departments at universities and those working as pastors within churches. The former are in a position of interacting with students who will become the leaders of congregations in the future. The latter will directly bear witness to a variety of social problems, including, but certainly not limited to, the problem of intergenerational strife.

Korean Christian Religious Education has been dominated by Fundamental Theology and *Minjung* Theology – theologies which have in turn been influenced by those dualities in Western philosophy epitomized by late nineteenth and twentieth century positivism. This dissertation outlines some of the pedagogical positions that have resulted from adherence to differing interpretations of positivism. It also shows how those positions have helped both to entrench certain social attitudes and expectations and to valorize certain notions of valuable relationships.

Overcoming the binary oppositions which fuel encounters between positivism and its critics consists of a number of philosophical and rhetorical repositionings that constitute much of what goes by the name, in the Western world, of post-positivism, post-structuralism, or postmodernism. They are,

however, only recently beginning to form possible moves within the confines of Christian Religious Education in South Korea.

Such repositionings are presented in this dissertation as an increasingly radical hermeneutical line – one running from the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer through that of Jürgen Habermas and on through that of Jacques Derrida and James Caputo. Hermeneutical positions explored in the dissertation involve beliefs about the constitution of meaning and its transformation into understanding in a variety of textual, intertextual, and extratextual encounters. Our beliefs about how we come to have understanding of the world and how we evaluate various interpretations of that world are integral to our assessments about what we deem important in all fields of education. The pedagogical practices that are then institutionalized to realize our educational goals in turn shape new or entrench pre-existing social forms of interaction. The result is the aforementioned valorization of some kinds of relationships over others. It is believed herein that changes in the philosophical assumptions that have guided theological and pedagogical positions in Korean Christian Religious Education will free educators to explore other approaches to the problems that exist in their world.

The exploration of such problems is not presented as something that exists outside theological and pedagogical or indeed hermeneutical pursuits. Such an exploration is presented as part of an on-going (radical) hermeneutical approach to questions about the formation of meaning, the growth of understanding, and the nurturing of relationships that are conducive to both.

The shaping of philosophical positions by the either/ors Platonism and positivism and their various reversals has resulted in a dominance of Theory that is formidable indeed. Having traveled the hermeneutical line traced in this dissertation, it is tempting to ask what practical consequences follow from the changes in theory advocated.

This dissertation attempts to undo the need to ask such a question. The emphases and arguments given at various points along the hermeneutical line are ones that attempt to shake the assumption that there are necessary links

between any allegedly 'given,' 'purely' philosophical/theoretical stance and any allegedly 'given,' 'purely' practical engagement. This dissertation takes the position that after having rebuked the dominance of Theory one should not then ask what 'the theoretical connection' is between a theory and a proposed course of action.

However, the dissertation defends the notion that all educators are always necessarily situated in specific contexts at specific points in time with specific doxastic assumptions and equipped with specific linguistic and social tools. It is thus very much against the idea that after having rebuked the dominance of Theory one is left with nothing but an 'anything goes' interpretation and engagement of the ideas and the world around them.

The non-Philosophical ethics of being situated accordingly and the ensuing sorts of responsibilities that Korean Religious Educators have to their larger communities in teaching and engaging the kinds of valued relationships are outlined in the concluding chapter. Strategies for overcoming intergenerational strife engendered by the Korean context are proposed.

Although the conclusions reached in this dissertation are obviously anti- or post- Philosophical *apropos* the connection between theory and practice, the tracing of the hermeneutical line that allows for the overcoming of the false dualisms that hamper Korean Christian Religious Education is very important. Key rewritings of traditional notions of meaning, understanding, and communication – rewritings that constitute the hermeneutical line traced – are the following.

Gadamer's challenge to the notion of hermeneutical understanding as a special kind of understanding – his underwriting of its universality – allows intellectual space for the Christian Religious Educator to consider relationships as (re-) creative of the very subjects that constitute them. Influenced by Gadamer's work, we begin to see ourselves and our life projects as necessarily intertwined with the life projects of countless other individuals and groups. We begin to see the interpenetration of the past and the present, of ourselves and others, and of our interpretations and preconceptions and reality. Such a seeing

provides us with a glimpse into the possibility that changes in those interpretations may well provoke changes in our relationships with others and, as a result, bring about change for the better in the world. Such possibility of change, of course, reminds us that we are alive and that acts of understanding have consequences in the world.

Significantly more than Gadamer, Derrida throws our preconceived dualisms asunder. The distinctions between faith and knowledge, subject and object, and self and other begin to lose their value as tools for acquiring both a better sense of understanding and for acquiring understanding itself. As such distinctions collapse, other distinctions that have helped to entrench traditional conceptions of the generation gap and related issues are drawn into question. We become more inclined to question the 'naturalness' of distinctions between center and margin, normal and abnormal, tradition and innovation, authority and resistance, male and female, familial and non-familial, and young and old.

Derrida's work strengthens Gadamer's and Habermas' suggestion that what goes by the name of Truth owes much to norms and regularities of belief, to the ossification of relationships. Most importantly, by blurring the concept/action distinction, it helps us to appreciate better the possibility that new truths and ideals may be brought into being by new forms of solidarity, new actions of a concerted nature, new forms of relationships. Derrida's work can, accordingly, overcome the Habermasian tendency to over-analyze existing relationships rather than testing their 'legitimacy' through engagement. More inclined to so question alleged givens, we become more inclined to listen to the voice of Others, more inclined to carefully attend to the micro-narratives that (accordingly) increasingly constitute our world. We become, for example, more confident about trying to engage young and old in mutually enculturating undertakings.

Derrida's work can, however, occasion a gleeful celebration of all that is, of all the chaos that is unfolding into ever-new relationships and forms of being. The hyper-celebration of countless, fluctuating relationships that a Derridean sensitivity to the play of the world encourages may not be properly attuned to the resistance that the world offers to our individual and collective attempts to gain

new understanding by entering into new relationships (and to leave behind undesirable, older relationships and forms of understanding). Having only Derridean sensitivities, some educators may be prevented from appreciating that choices are made from within a variety of inter-personal, social, and economic contexts.

It is particularly here I believe that the work of Caputo is very important for Christian Religious Educators. More than Gadamer's and Habermas' reconceptions of tradition, Caputo's insights into the situational dynamics of flux keep our minds open to how the interpenetration of various types of practice – including economic and political – can shape a generation and its individual members. His ideas of flux help us to see, beyond the suggestions provided by Habermas, the details of how an individual's capabilities and actions can be formed by relations of power over which the individual has no control. His work helps us to see the very identity of different generations as not given or fixed, but as radically and varyingly re-constructed. Moreover, Caputo's notion of flux entices educators to expose themselves to the radical uncertainty and open – endedness of life that is always the future in its absolute unknowability.

Caputo's work is also unique in the way it helps us better understand why facing our challenges involves the radical risk-taking of actually acting on our faith in the living present. With Caputo, we must accept that there are not only 'safe' events that we will encounter in our work, but that there are also disastrous ones, ones without precedent, ones that will always leave us guessing, ones that will always leave us at one with indecision in the flux.

In other words, Caputo provides us with a sense of the flux that is concomitant with a sense that there is much danger in the world, that there is danger to the Self that seeks out the voice of the Other. Caputo provides us with a sense that understanding involves much risk taking. Equally important, however, is the fact that he also encourages us to take risk, to forego the hyper-deliberations required by positivistic notions of certainty and unwittingly encouraged by Habermasian will-to-theory. Caputo's work readies us psychologically and emotionally for the kinds of challenges we face in gaining

understanding and entering into new relationships in a 'postmodern' world.

While Caputo helps us understand that our relationships with others are necessarily constitutive of an element of the unknowable, he is steadfast in his belief that such an element should not discourage our acting in the world. His work encourages a going forward into the unknown as an integral part of all attempts to gain understanding and to build productive, valuable relationships. It helps us to see that it is especially in a contingent, in part unknowable world that we know ourselves and others and our known by others as a result of our doings – our stepping forward – as 'the tree is known by its fruit' (Matthew 12:33).

Caputo does caution us that we ourselves may also be the perpetrators of a Derridean violence as we engage the lives of others, and it is here that his flux model is an insistent call for renewed human responsibility in questioning both the preconceptions of older generations and the ways of disciplinary and normalizing education that have shaped and continue to shape all Koreans. It is a call for responsibility in proposing new norms, in deciding what has to be done, in engaging those cautious acts of naming required to bring change into our midst.