"Wandering Through Life"—Introducing Philosophical Practice with Children and Adolescents in the Church of Norway

Project presentation by Øyvind Olsholt
Co-Director of Children and Youth Philosophers, Norway
http://www.buf.no/en

Abstract

In 2006 Children and Youth Philosophers commenced a project in the Church of Norway named "Wandering through life". Besides Children and Youth Philosophers the project involves three church organisations: Youth Chorister's Association, The Pilgrim Priests and Liturgical Centre. Together we search for parallels as well as incongruities between philosophical and religious practice—in particular we want to look into the relationship between pilgrimage and philosophical dialogue. Also an important aim of the project is to educate and train church youth leaders enabling them to lead philosophical dialogues with children and youth in the Church of Norway. The project runs through 2008.

Description of the project "Wandering through life"

On May 27th 2003 the Norwegian Parliament voted to reform the church's religious education. Before the introduction of this reform religious education had been the responsibility of the grade schools. However, due to substantial alterations in the school's Religion curriculum over the last 10-15 years—where the pivotal role of Christianity was down-played and where preaching in school was banned altogether—the government decided to continue religious education outside of school under the auspices of the church itself. Specifically, the Parliament wanted religious education in the Church of Norway to "stimulate the development of one's own identity and understanding of one's own culture and traditions in a society where the mix of different religious and secular communities is becoming increasingly richer." The total funds allocated to the reform in 2005 amounted to 55 million Norwegian kroner (approx. €7m).

These funds made possible a whole range of different projects, one of which is the present project called "Wandering through life". The project involves the following church organisations: *Youth*

Chorister's Association, *The Pilgrim Priests* and *Liturgical Centre*. *Youth Chorister's Association* unites children- and youth choir singers in congregations all over Norway. The association has approximately 280 member choirs comprising more than 7000 individual members. *Youth Chorister's Association* initiated the project, applied for funds and works as a hub for the other participating organisations. *The Pilgrim Priests* are appointed by the church to enhance interest for the 1000-year-old pilgrim traditions in Norway. Finally *Liturgical Centre* is a church resource centre specialising in liturgy, hymnology and church music.

I should say a few words about my own organisation as well. Ariane Schjelderup and I started *Children and Youth Philosophers* in 2000, following several years of philosophical practice with children and adolescents. We are both Masters in Philosophy and since 1997 we have had lots of projects in schools, kindergartens and other institutions working with or for children. We have written two books in Norwegian: *Filosofi i skolen* (Philosophy in School), the first book on philosophy for children in Norwegian (1999), and *Filosofi—Sokrates, Platon og Aristoteles* (Philosophy—Socrates, Plato and Aristotle), an illustrated presentation of the philosophers of antiquity written for young people (2001).

It is safe to say that the project group consists of people with widely different backgrounds (all project members apart from the philosophers subscribing to the Christian faith), hence different experiences, and, as it turns out, different views on—and expectations to—the role of philosophical practice in the realm of faith. The church representatives search primarily for ways to strengthen and anchor the faith by way of philosophical enquiry; we (the philosophers) are more concerned with the general impact of philosophy in contexts where certain truths (dogmas) are more or less taken for granted. However, should it turn out that the philosophical practice *does* lead to a strengthening of the religious faith of the participant's, we have no qualms whatsoever with that. It would be a very interesting outcome that needs to be examined in order to confirm possible causes and premises.

Differences in outlook notwithstanding we agree on the following project mandate:

> *Philosophical practice*
> Develop and run training courses in philosophy for children for adult leaders in the church—courses to be applied in the Church of Norway's new religious education programme. Try out philosophical practice within a pilgrim setting and evaluate the transfer value to other arenas of religious education.

> *Pilgrimage*
> Develop courses and material related to pilgrimage, and suggest pilgrim activities adapted to local customs and traditions. Produce a leaflet for pilgrims focusing on the meditative aspect of pilgrimage, containing songs and liturgical prayers about the rhythm of the day and the rhythm of life.

> *Project events*
> Arrange pilgrim tours for the summers of 2007 and 2008. Evaluate these events and their transfer value to other arenas of religious education.

The primary task is to educate, train and empower adult leaders in the church so that they are able to facilitate philosophical enquiries with children and adolescents on their own. An important facet of this guiding process is to locate—or, if needed, to create—material that is suitable as starting points for philosophical enquiry. When we say "adult leaders" we refer to persons from 15-16 years upwards. Many young people are conductors of local children's choirs, and if they are keen to learn

about philosophical practice, there is no reason to exclude them just because they are young. The second main task is to try out philosophical dialogue with young people in a pilgrim setting. The idea is to walk some distance with groups of children and adolescents interspersing philosophical dialogue whenever desirable.

I'll come back to these two main tasks in a minute. First let me draw some theoretical parallels between philosophical practice and pilgrimage. The two practices have more in common than one should at first think.

Philosophy and pilgrimage

Take a typical pilgrim: she walks at slow pace, in solitude, even when she walks in the company of others. Maintaining a steady walking rhythm she moves pensively and peacefully, travelling as much in her own mind as in the physical world that surrounds her. As she walks she becomes increasingly aware of a multitude of thoughts and feelings, but by the end of the day only the most solid and "down-to-earth" thoughts remain in her head. It is as if the contemplative wandering makes the superficial and insubstantial thoughts—thoughts that often occupy the better part of our consciousness in everyday life—evaporate in thin air.

Now, take a typical—or should I say ideal—philosophical enquirer: she too moves at slow pace, carefully passing from statement to statement, from argument to argument, from question to question, identifying each phrase before moving to the next. She too is concentrated, at home with herself so to speak, even when she partakes in a group. She too digs deeply into her own mind, not in order to make for an escape from the outer world, but in an effort to bring forward the meanings of —and interconnections between—the spoken words, both her own and those coming from her co-enquirers. Also, one could say that after a philosophical session only the most solid, well-founded and substantiated thoughts remain in the consciousness of the enquirer. Irrelevant examples, unsupported claims, fanciful suppositions, wild ideas and other loose ends bounce off as the intellectual drama of the dialogue comes to a head.

But there are more—and more profound—similarities between Christian pilgrimage and philosophical enquiry. Let us look at four stages often used to describe the process of pilgrimage:

Expectation
Abraham, the first pilgrim, was promised new land and a blessing from God. So, when entering upon his new, nomadic life, he was full of expectation. Like Abraham a pilgrim has great expectations to her journey: she hopes for a divine intervention, or at least to open up to God, and to discover new meaningfulness in the company of other pilgrims.

Breaking-up
Like Abraham, who could no longer live his old life having received a promise from God, a pilgrim breaks up from her old life and habits. Also, in the life of a Christian, there is a perpetual need of breaking up from sin, convenience, conformism, from stale relations and lack of love.

The wandering
For a pilgrim the way towards the goal is a goal in itself. Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth and the life". While she wanders she gains a clearer image of Jesus. The wandering generates a "magnet" within, pulling her towards her port of goal. Indeed, life itself becomes a pilgrimage towards a sacred goal. And despite the fact that she mainly walks in

silence and solitude, she gradually opens up to other people, to nature and to the world. Gradually she is filled with love and thankfulness, hence with an urge to express herself, to make herself visible and public.

The destination

For the Christian pilgrim Jesus is not only the way, but the destination too. So, metaphorically, reaching the destination is reaching and receiving Jesus. In a wider perspective one now realises more clearly that life itself is the true pilgrimage making this concrete, particular pilgrimage a stretch on the long way towards eternal life. Physically the pilgrim has now reached her sacred place, lays down her staff, pauses and reflects on her life, prays for forgiveness and rejoices with the other pilgrims in the praise of God.

Now, compare these four stages with the process of philosophical enquiry as we know it from Socrates and Plato and later from the basic principles of community of enquiry familiar from the philosophy for children-methodology:

Expectation

Upon entering a philosophical enquiry we have certain expectations. We hope that the group will be able and willing to open up and thus to unveil meanings, arguments and daring hypotheses. We do *not* have a divine promise, like Abraham, but we do realise that we are bearers of a "philosophical wonder" that keeps urging us towards new and more fulfilling answers. This wonder is not our own invention, rather it *reveals* itself to us, gradually. We share with the pilgrim the expectation that the answers will come to us during the process, in due course—*not* through divine intervention or mystical revelation, but through rational and communal enquiry.

Breaking-up

In the communal enquiry we communicate very differently from what we are used to. Therefore we too need to depart from our habits, from "convenience and conformism", from the desire to win discussions, from the stream-of-consciousness type of conversations so often seen in personal and professional contexts, from the general lack of attentiveness and presence in everyday communication. Breaking-up is difficult: it is always more comfortable to stay where you are. Therefore philosophers often entice us to make a leap into the uncertain, e.g. when Socrates cross-examines his interlocutors to the extent that they "become saturated with puzzlement" (Meno 80A-B), or when Kierkegaard stresses the necessity of objective uncertainty in order to reach subjective truth. According to Kierkegaard, a real breaking-up requires a leap over 70,000 fathoms of water, i.e. a leap of faith, a leap away from certitude and commonly established knowledge.

The wandering

The wandering of philosophical enquiry is the never-ending oscillation between assumptions and arguments, between statements and examples, between hypotheses and derived consequences. Like for the pilgrim the process is a goal in itself. Philosophers do not usually walk with Christ, yet it is appropriate to say that they walk (i.e. think) in search of *truth*. Wandering with thought means wandering with truth in the sense that truth is the guiding star, the inner "magnet" with a potential to convert our life into a philosophical pilgrimage. Also our thinking does not exist in a vacuum, as little as the pilgrim wanders in splendid isolation. Our thinking thrives when we expose it to other people's opinions

and judgements. We too are filled with joy and gratitude as we see our thoughts develop organically in the community of co-enquirers.

The destination

Does philosophical enquiry have a goal, like pilgrimage has Christ as the ultimate destination? One could say that the enquiry has an ultimate goal, but not an ultimate destination. It has *truth*. Truth is an ideal not to be acquired but to give guidance to the on-going philosophical practice—cf. Socrates' "daimon", his inner voice, warning him of erroneous or inappropriate actions and judgements. So just like the latest stretch of wandering for the pilgrim is but a small part of life's wandering, so is a philosophical session for the philosopher a small but never insignificant step on the eternal road to wisdom and truth. And just as the pilgrim rejoices at the journey's end the philosophical enquirer rejoices every time she lucidly exposes an invalid argument, gives a striking counter-example to a particularly stubborn hypothesis, produces a reason that shifts the enquiry into another perspective etc. (with the possible exception of the enquirer whose arguments and hypotheses are being effectively challenged).

Having identified some similarities and differences between the two practices we can now move on to the project itself. I'll start by describing our first weekend training course, then give a report from our first pilgrimage weekend, arranged six months later.

Philosophical training course

January 2007 we arranged our first philosophy and pilgrimage weekend seminar in Lillehammer (which is where the XVII Olympic Winter Games were arranged in 1994). Participants were recruited from *Youth Chorister's Association*. Most of them (30 in total) conductors of local church choirs for children, a few were church musicians. A majority were teenagers or young adults. The main purpose of the course was to empower the participants so that they would be able to start leading philosophical dialogues with the children in their choirs back home.

To prepare the participants for the facilitation of philosophical enquiry, we used two types of activities: participation in philosophical dialogues using biblical texts (one of which were held in connection with a one hour pilgrim walk to a nearby church), and exercises/group work to train specific dialogical/thinking skills.

In the dialogues we split the participants into two groups. We started the first dialogue by reading aloud *Exodus 17:1-6* (the people rebelled against Yahweh when they thirsted, claiming that Moses had brought them out into the wilderness to kill them by thirst, Moses then brings water from the rock with his staff). The second dialogue started with the reading of *John 5:1-15* (Jesus heals a paralytic at the pool of Bethesda). On both occasions we agreed that it was sensible to read the texts twice before entering into dialogue in order to grasp as many details and as much of the structure of the narrative as possible. After this, we invited the participants to put forward questions related to the texts. We wrote each question down and dealt with one at a time.

Two questions forwarded to the latter text: "Were there more miracles when Jesus lived than there are today?" and "Was it wrong of Jesus to ask the man to break the Sabbath?" Two very different questions, one dealing with supernatural events and epochal consciousness, the other with ethical considerations and divine omnipotence. Before trying to answer the questions we took time to "dissect" them as it were, making clear in what way the participants interpreted the questions and the words therein.

It was important for us to create an understanding among the participants that philosophical enquiry has a lot to do with tearing loose ("breaking-up") from commonly accepted opinion in order to open up to what the project group had termed "clear and unprejudiced thought". Therefore, the exercises presented to the group were of the "technical" kind, training specific facilitation skills. Also, they were meant to de-contextualise the participants from their familiar "congregational" thinking modes and vernacular. Before being able to learn new things, we must *unlearn* what we already know and (think that we) "possess".

We did two exercises in small groups consisting of 4-5 participants. The first exercise was about formulating questions and follow-up questions:

> Each participant produces a question suitable for philosophical enquiry.
>
> The group chooses one of these question to work with, checks if the question is unclear or if something in the formulation needs to be explained further. If so, the question is re-formulated.
>
> Each participant formulates an answer to the chosen question. Then the group selects one of the answers. Why did the group choose this answer? What made it a better answer?
>
> Now the group formulates three different follow-up questions to the answer. At least one of the questions should be *clarifying* (ask for explanation, premises etc.), and one should be *problematising* (address a weakness inherent in the answer, e.g. by suggesting a counter-example).
>
> If there is time left, the group tries to answer each of the proposed questions.

The idea was to make the participants familiar with the distinction between clarifying and problematising questions. The former type of questions tries to identify the issue at hand by asking for an elucidation of the statement, e.g. by asking for reformulation, pointing out premises, logical flaws etc. Such questioning represents an *internal critic*: the statement is analysed "as is", considering nothing that is not integral to the statement itself. The latter type of question aims to expose weaknesses in the statements by using an *external critic*, e.g. by introducing counter-examples. For instance, a clarifying and problematising question to the statement "Humans are animals" could be: "Does this imply also that animals are human?" This is a clarifying question because it examines the logical relationship between the two concepts in the statement. No new concepts are introduced. However, the question "Is there a quality pertaining to humans that does not pertain to other animals?" is a problematising question because it calls for a new concept (a property or a characteristic of humans) that is not native to the original formulation.

In the second exercise we sought to train the skill to produce and evaluate arguments for sample statements. In order to make the exercise more demanding we had chosen statements usually considered arguable or politically incorrect:

> Select two of the following statements and give an argument for each of them that supports them (preferably with examples):
>
> "Parents always know best, and we should always do as they say."
> "Man does not need God."
> "I decide for myself which rules to live by."

> "It is all right for parents to beat their children."
> "Europeans are more valuable than people from other parts of the world."
> "The most important thing is to make a lot of money."
> "It is okay to treat others badly when others treat me badly."
>
> Evaluate your arguments. Have you given good arguments for the statements? Would it be easy to gainsay your arguments? If so, try to find better reasons.

The initial feedback from the participants was that the exercises seemed a little strange and artificial, especially the last one since they were asked to argue for views that they found dubious or objectionable. Nevertheless, most of them soon grasped the point of the exercise, and once they managed to *detach* themselves from the viewpoints in question they found the exercise thought-provoking and rewarding. They discovered that they were able to evaluate an argument *on its own grounds*, without having to filter it through the sieves of "generally accepted views in the Church" or "common cultural understanding" or "the morally good"—without forcing the argument to comply with what Heidegger called "das Man" before rendering it worthy of closer inspection.

This was a new experience to everybody—as well as to the non-philosophers of the project administration group—perhaps not quite what they had expected from philosophical coaches. I think what may have surprised the participants was the formality of the activities. Where was the metaphysic depth and fragile religious sentiment? I think they, consciously or unconsciously, expected us to trigger wonder and marvel in the young audiences, like a gifted story-teller or magician would do—which is, by the way, a perfectly common expectation to philosophical practitioners from adult leaders working with children and adolescents. And indeed, would we not all hail a sage who promises to create a magnificent philosophical meta-world into which we could throw ourselves and become healed and whole? But, as Socrates taught us, such creation (illusionism) is the task of the artist, not of the philosopher. The philosopher's task is to make the participants *conscious of themselves* in the austere and not so magic light of reason. And as I said, after an initial phase of hesitation and resistance the participants took the point of the exercises and contributed with energy and joy.

Pilgrimage and philosophy in Dovrefjell National Park

Dovrefjell is the name of a spectacular mountain range linking the south-eastern and the middle part of Norway. The Old Kings' Highway goes through the Dovre mountains and has been used by Norwegian kings since the Viking era. This historical road has also been used by countless pilgrims since the 11th century on their way to the famous Nidaros cathedral in Trondheim. *This* was the backdrop of our first pilgrimage weekend held in August 2007 comprising nine children/adolescents and five adults. Now, was there, as we had hoped and predicted, taking place a fruitful exchange between the two practices?

We spent three days trekking, covering in total 30 kilometres largely on plain mountain paths. Every morning and evening we had a dialogue session; one day we also had a midday session during a walking break. The first session had a simple opening question: "Why embark on a pilgrimage?" The youngest participant (11 yo) replied that she had joined because the weekend sounded fun. What in particular did she expect to be funny? Walking in the nature. An older participant expanded on this: pilgrimage is as much about walking in the *mind* as in the nature. But what does it mean to "walk in the mind"? A third participant suggested that it has to do with the "transformation of thoughts and feelings". The key word was "transformation". Pilgrimage, walking in the mind, is about the transformation of the mind, said one boy, a transformation that is more or less equivalent

with what we understand as "religious conversion". But what if we don't experience a transformation or conversion during our pilgrimage, have we then failed to walk in the mind? No, the discovering of the workings of our own consciousness, the multitude of unanswered questions and unquestioned answers, is just as important a goal for a pilgrim and represents a small transformation in itself.

In the evening that day, enjoying the cosy atmosphere of a traditional mountain cottage, we gathered around the fireplace for our second session which morphed into an attempt to define happiness. One adolescent claimed that happiness is at its peak when we look forward to something—i.e. expectation is preferable to the fulfilment of the expectation. The children, however, agreed with one of the adults who found that expectation and fulfilment are equally important: they complement each other.

Next morning one child wanted to know why we do philosophy. I asked the group that found that just as the body needs exercise so does our mind. And again it was emphasised that philosophical practice helps us realise our own questions and answers. The next session that evening started with a reading from *2 Samuel 12* where the prophet Nathan rebukes king David for killing Uriah the Hittite and taking his wife Bathsheba to be his own. Even though we read the text aloud several times it proved very difficult for most of the participants to retell the plot using their own words, so we spent some time just getting familiar with the story. Then we tried to pin-point the most controversial or thought-provoking aspect of the story. According to the group this was when David said "I have sinned against the lord" to which Nathan replied "The lord has taken away your sin". But is it enough to admit your sins in order to remove the sins? And if your sin is taken away, are you then *forgiven* as well? We wrestled enthusiastically with these and other questions relevant to the text until it was time to turn in for the night.

After this weekend I see more clearly the value of trying to attain philosophical-analytical awareness in combination with religious-mystic/mythic presence. Indeed, the weekend proved to be at the same time enlightening, awakening and reviving—even for me, the only non-Christian in the group. The steady but never monotonous walking, mostly in silence in this hauntingly beautiful mountain area, hour after hour, caused a mild cacophony of voices and perceptions to emerge in the minds of the participants (at least it did so for me), a cacophony that in turn made the structured philosophical dialogues that followed seem just as rewarding and fulfilling as the evening meals. The walking made us hungry, physically and spiritually. Our minds were as attentive and vigilant as ever after a long day's walk, although our bodies were exhausted. One could perhaps sum it up by saying that just as the time prayers during the weekend were recurring feasts for the spiritual self, so the philosophical dialogues were recurring feasts for the rational, thinking, deliberating self.

Religious and secular humanism: different takes on (the same?) philosophical practice

Finally I would like to make a comment on the relationship between the religious and the secular stance on philosophy and philosophical practice. In Norway there is an organisation called *Norwegian Humanist Association*. This organisation is "for people who base their ethics on human, not religious values." Their members understand themselves as agnostics or atheists. They define humanism as "a life stance in which the understanding of reality and ethics is based on reason and experience, rational and critical thinking, feelings and human compassion." Moreover they assert that: "Humanism is devoid of religious conceptions. In humanism, the independent and responsible human being is placed in the centre." (All quotes from www.human.no) No wonder that this organisation has shown considerable interest in philosophical practice for years, regarding this practice a

most pertinent alternative, indeed, a *successor*, to religion and religious faith—both of which they consider antiquated and irrelevant in today's secular and scientifically-oriented world.

What is perhaps more surprising (i.e. what is more in need of an explanation), is the immediate enthusiasm with which the church has embraced the very same philosophical practice. Granted, the church is an ancient institution with long-standing traditions for philosophical reflection. In Medieval times the Christian scholastics attempted to solve problems in relation to faith and reason and to create a rational foundation for a faith that was already well established, psychologically and culturally. But if it is true that philosophical practice today is an ideal tool for the dismantling of religion and religious faith, how come that the same practice—in a religious setting—is conceived of as a method to strengthen and anchor the Christian faith? Are we really talking about the same practice? How can fervent anti-religious humanists and devoted Christians wholeheartedly embrace one and the same philosophical practice?

To approach an answer, let's have a quick look at how the humanists argue when they wish to promote philosophy for children. One of the officials of the *Norwegian Humanist Association* published the following commentary in the association's journal *Free thought* (no. 1, 2005):

> One of the reasons why humanists ought to welcome [...] philosophy for children is that this practice embodies the very essence of humanist ideals in relation to the upbringing of children. The philosophical refinement of children's wonderment is completely different from the religious principles of child rearing which are all about *adaptation* and *moulding*. Whereas religion wants the child to absorb the culture's (i.e. the adult's) understanding of reality, philosophy gives the children a chance to create new conceptions of reality. This is something that the world needs.

According to this author the building blocks of philosophical enquiry with children—reflection, openness, wonderment, curiosity, self-creation etc.—are incompatible with the building blocks of Christian child rearing which is still based on old-fashioned didactics or downright indoctrination. But even if this were true, one should ask the following question before starting to draw conclusions: is it really impossible for a person who believes in God to convey to the child some understanding of her belief and *at the same time* stimulate openness, reflection and wonderment? If so, what makes it impossible? Could the truths of faith be transferred to the child *whilst* engaging in philosophical dialogue with the child, or must one do one thing at a time? (We see a similar conflict in modern schools where pedagogues are instructed to teach curriculum content to pupils and *at the same time* to encourage them to become reflective, creative, questioning, open-minded, prejudice-free etc.)

Besides, perhaps the church of today is less preoccupied with the old-fashioned "adaptation" and "moulding" practice than the humanists seem to believe? The following passage, taken from the pilgrim and philosophy project application (written by a leader in *Youth Chorister's Association*), seems indirectly to point in this direction:

> Adolescents (12+) drop out of many (church) organisations. Especially boys tend to leave church activities. It is very difficult to get them back again once they have started to lose interest. Thus, we must offer more gathering points while they are still active in the choirs [...] But this is not enough. In addition we must offer *different kinds* of activities [...] that are found appealing over a longer period of time. [...] Many congregations have tried pilgrimage as a new type of activity. But no one has yet tried to merge pilgrimage with philosophically structured dialogue and wonderment.

Note that both authors refer to "wonderment". The ability to wonder, so often seen in small children —the open and mystic gaze into the universe or into the soul—is a human quality praised by humanists and Christians alike. According to the humanists, however, there is nothing religious in this "wonderment". It is "pure", cleansed of all religious intent and content. But is it not possible to construe the child-like wonderment as a preamble to the more mature yearning for *transcendence*, the yearning for a connection to "the other side", "the inner self" or "the force within"—a yearning common among spiritually oriented adults of our time (or, indeed, of any time)? If it is, is not then wonderment just as religious in its nature as faith?

Moreover, the main concern in the latter text is not how to mould children into preconfigured shapes. The main concern is how to make the boys stay in the church. One could of course argue that the reason why the boys leave in the first place is exactly the church's inclination to mould them into religious forms. But I do not think this is the reason, or at least not the whole reason. In modern church societies you are accepted whether you consider yourself a believer or not. No one forces you to believe anything. You may be an agnostic or even an atheist—and proclaim it—still you would not be denied access to the church. As an example, I would like to remind the reader that the author of these lines—a proclaimed non-believer/agnostic—has been received with open arms in this very project—a project, on top of everything, where the author is the "moulder" rather than the "moulded"! Anyway, how can one tell whether a person is a "real" believer or not?

In my view, a more likely reason for the drop-out is the church's ideological, aesthetic, moral and social *alterity* with the rest of society. The church actually believes in the incarnation and reincarnation of a God who lives in Heaven, congregates in medieval-looking buildings singing angelic hymns, suggesting a pious and virtuous way of life and interacting with each other in an air of humorous (never ironic) solemnity. Such an orientation deviate radically from the traits of modern society which can be described as ideologically dissolved, aesthetically fragmented, morally individualised and socially alienated. At a certain point in life the discrepancy between these two cultures simply becomes unbearable for young people who seek wholeness and identity; they can no longer exist in both worlds. So there has to be a sacrifice, and as it happens modernity usually draws the longest straw. Which should come as no surprise. After all, it is outside of church that they spend most of their lives: going to school, being with friends, partaking in leisure activities etc.—modernity is the *normality*. From an adolescent's point of view the church is simply not "cool" enough; it is too lenient, too good-hearted, too edifying, too holy, too feminine perhaps; it is too "warm"... Or so it may appear to a male teenager. Boys still look for challenges and dangers in an attempt to reach for an ancient ideal of manhood still widely accepted and promoted in our "advanced" culture. In comparison, there is very little danger to be found in the church, ultimately "only" a safe haven for the soul.

In order to bridge the gap between the two cultures the church looks to philosophy—a discipline nearly as old as religion itself. And in so doing, it discovers that philosophical practice is not just a modern and trendy *supplement* to the old adaptation-and-moulding practice, but represents a new approach to the whole religious educational ideology. The new and radical item that philosophy brings on-board is a series of 180 degree changes of directions: it shifts the focus from learning to unlearning, from adult teaches child to child teaches adult, from eternal possession of truth to never-ending quest for truth, from learning by gradual adaptation to circumstance to learning by instant adoption (i.e. understanding, recognition) of circumstance, from herd mentality to individualism, from the security of knowledge to the perils of doubt and deliberation. The question is: how can such a revolutionary practice further the church's core belief: the faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour, the belief in "the way, the truth and the life"?

One possible answer is of course that a new practice attracts attention—like a new toy catches the immediate interest of a child weary of its old toys. A more sophisticated answer would be: by letting the children reflect upon their faith, by letting go of predefined answers in matters theological, by trusting and supporting the child in its search for an understanding of its identity, its culture and world-view (remember the goal of the aforementioned educational reform: to "stimulate the development of one's own identity and understanding of one's own culture and traditions [...]"), the church demonstrates that it is willing to *listen*. And one who is willing to listen, will be listened to in return.

A third possible answer—as mentioned above—could be that the church now sees philosophy as a genuinely new way to approach the realm of faith. Faith is no longer a state or condition to be reached once and for all, not a platform from which one enjoys a clear and unambiguous outlook on self and others "from eternity to eternity", but rather something that is subject to constant change and evolution so that the process of enquiring thinking becomes a necessary ingredient in the equally constant pursuit of "the way, the truth and the life". Faith is thereby not abandoned, but re-interpreted in order to open up to the multifarious ways of acquiring and maintaining faith making the function of faith in Christian practice approximate the function of truth in philosophical practice. In this case faith would become a *regulating ideal* of the life and practice of the Christian rather than a *fixed idea*.

I am not sure if this is the church's answer to the question, but if it is, one consequence would be that the humanist's criticism of the church becomes irrelevant. There is no more "adaptation and moulding" going on in the church, only faith-seeking practices and procedures very similar to the "philosophical refinement of children's wonderment" that the humanists themselves so emphatically endorse. The main difference between the two would be that the religious practice seeks *faith* whereas the humanist practice seeks *truth*—both, however, accepting the infiniteness of the task.

But, there is an important modification to be made here. Obviously, a Christian seeks not faith alone, but truth as well. After all, Jesus is "the way, the truth and the life". Seeking faith (in Jesus) is therefore equivalent to seeking truth (since Jesus *is* the truth). Then it follows that if you have faith in Jesus, if you have Jesus by your side, then you also have truth by your side. If faith is achievable—which it is, for a Christian—so is truth. Now, if this is the case one could ask what becomes of faith as a regulating ideal. Are we not then back to square one, back to the common secular accusation that the church is not really letting philosophy take over the epistemological, metaphysical and pedagogical reigns?

This accusation, however, could easily be turned against the seculars themselves. Observe how easy it is today to support the idea of truth as an open, tolerant, all-inclusive, never-ending human quest. In contemporary secular culture it is common knowledge that there exist no more universal truths, that openness and tolerance are required in an increasingly multicultural society, that human life in all its aspects is an ever-continuing process etc. Indeed, such truths are intrinsic to the modern way of life. So, should anyone raise a critical voice against this cultural predominance she is quickly and effectively labelled a heretic, an enemy of the good society. Hence, for the humanists, there is absolutely no political risk involved in promoting a philosophical practice that is based on these democratic values. It is just stating the obvious.

But imagine what would happen if a philosophical community—based on the same values—should suddenly start to oppose the tenets that are quintessential to humanists: i.e. if the community should start producing better arguments for the existence rather than for the non-existence of God, better arguments for religious faith than for human ethics, for the divine and immortal soul than for "the

independent and responsible human being"? Such an outcome is conceivable, given the open-ended and truth-seeking characteristics of the dialogue. In such a case, would not the humanists respond, rather like the church, that in the end of the day there are truths that are more important—i.e. of higher value—than whatever the philosophical investigations into these truths may reveal? Would they not have to say that philosophical enquiry is all very well as long as it does not contradict their most basic beliefs? If so, it seems the humanists would be no less "believers" than the Christians. Only they believe in different things: humanists believe in an immanent, non-revelational reality, the Christians believe in the revelation of a transcendent God.

We have here a variant of the "liberal dilemma": if you want children to become free, open and democratic in spirit and behaviour you also have to accept criticism and statements that may contradict and defy these very values. The same applies to religious contexts: if you really want children to explore their own path towards faith and truth you have to bear with the fact that not everybody will end up as believers of the Christian faith. I interpret this liberal dilemma as an indication that one does not control the outcome of a philosophical investigation. Moreover, one is not supposed to attain such control. Philosophy is not a handy-tool with which one can achieve extra-philosophical ends and purposes—secular, religious or otherwise. Philosophy lives it own life. There is always a risk with philosophy. Or to put it more bluntly, as Allan Bloom contends in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*: "reason accepts no authority above itself and is necessarily subversive".