

The Role of Religious Education in Promoting Active Pluralism in Belgium

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ABSTRACT: In the context of the growing cultural and religious diversity in contemporary society, religious education plays a crucial role in promoting mutual understanding and respect. This article explores the concept of "active pluralism" and its relevance in the current educational landscape, contrasting it with traditional models of religious education such as mono-religious and multireligious approaches. By examining educational theories and practices, the article highlights the advantages of interreligious education, which encourages active dialogue and empathetic understanding among students of different faiths. Additionally, the challenges and criticisms of passive pluralism are discussed, along with solutions for more effective implementation of interreligious education. The study focuses on the historical and educational context of Belgium, offering insights into how active pluralism can be effectively integrated into school curricula. The conclusions suggest that active pluralism and interreligious education are essential for developing an inclusive society capable of managing religious diversity in a constructive and harmonious manner.

KEYWORDS: active pluralism, interreligious education, cultural diversity, mutual understanding, educational values

1. Introduction

In the modern educational landscape, values are continuously evolving, reflecting an increasing cultural and religious diversity. In this context, religious pluralism becomes an essential component of education, representing both a challenge and an opportunity for contemporary society. As individualism and extremism become more prevalent, the need to integrate educational values that promote tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding is more urgent than ever (Rotaru 2016, 29-43).

The first part of this article explores the historical context of Belgium, highlighting the evolution of active pluralism. Over time, Belgium has experienced various stages of cultural and religious diversity, each contributing to the development of the idea of active pluralism. This section analyzes societal reactions to cultural diversity in Belgium, culminating in contemporary proposals for implementing active pluralism.

The second part addresses the proposal for interreligious learning, emphasizing the importance of this educational model in contrast to traditional mono- and multireligious learning models. The effectiveness of interreligious learning in responding to the educational needs of a diverse society is detailed, focusing on the main methods and objectives of this learning model.

Furthermore, the challenges of implementing interreligious learning are explored, including the readiness of various religious denominations to participate in this educational model, the impact of predominantly Christian frameworks in religious education, and the integration of students with non-religious beliefs or indifference towards religion. It is crucial to assess the suitability of the learning model for the age and capabilities of students, as well as addressing the issue of theologically irreconcilable differences.

In the final part, the situation in Flemish schools is examined, analyzing the curricula for religious education in Catholic and state schools, as well as practical applications that support the idea of interreligious learning. This includes an evaluation of how these plans can be implemented to promote pluralistic and inclusive education.

Current educational values (Rotaru 2021a, 87-92) and religious pluralism play a crucial role in developing a harmonious and tolerant society. In the context of everyday individualism and extremism, it is essential to cultivate the ability of future generations to respect and understand religious and cultural diversity, thus contributing to the construction of a more peaceful and inclusive world.

2. Migration and Multiculturalism: Challenges and Policies in Belgium

2.1. The Impact of Migration on Belgium's Social and Policy Landscape

2.1.1. History

Over the past century, significant changes have taken place in Belgium and much of the world, largely driven by migration and its consequences. Migration has led to increasing diversity, evident not just in cities but also in rural areas. The issue now is not whether to allow migration, but how to manage it effectively (Stevaert 2005, 9).

Migration is not unique to Belgium nor is it a recent phenomenon. Human movement has always occurred for various reasons. In the last century, similar migration patterns have been observed across Western Europe. This began in the late Middle Ages with European colonization, which can be seen as an early step towards today's globalization (Rotaru 2014, 532-541). In the 20th century, former colonies began migrating to Western Europe (Council of Europe and European Commission, 2000, 9-100).

The first major wave of migration to Belgium occurred after World War II, driven by the need for reconstruction and labor shortages. Initially, Italian guest workers were invited, but economic downturns and poor working conditions led to shifts in migrant sources to other Mediterranean countries (Verlot 2001, 33-35). The 1960s saw another influx of foreign workers due to economic growth, but the 1974 European Economic Community (EEC) immigration halt marked a significant change (Van Den Broeck and Foblets 2002, 16). Post-1974, migration shifted from temporary labor to family reunification, with migrants settling permanently in Belgium and Western Europe. This led to new societal reactions and the need for policies addressing long-term integration.

2.1.2. The Evolution of Migration Policy and Integration in Belgium

Before 1988, there was little popular literature on the issue of migration in Belgium, reflecting a general lack of interest (Van Den Broeck & Foblets 2002, 16). This was primarily due to the belief that guest workers were only temporarily residing in the country. However, after the 1974 migration stop and the shift in the nature of immigration, it became evident that these workers and their families intended to settle permanently (Van Den Broeck & Foblets 2002, 18). Public concern grew significantly when, in 1988, one-fifth of Antwerp's population voted for the Vlaams Blok, a far-right political party. Scientific interest in migration in Belgium also began to increase post-1974, leading to the first significant study on migrant disadvantage in 1978, which remains relevant today (Verlot 2001, 11).

Politically, awareness of the issue began earlier. The 1974 migration stop by the EEC initiated an integration policy, based on the ideal of cultural pluralism, allowing migrants to participate in society while retaining their own culture (Verlot 2001, 13). There are three main approaches to dealing with minorities and diversity: segregation, assimilation, and integration (Verlot 2001, 13-17). Belgium follows the integration model, which has two types: minimal and voluntaristic (Verlot 2001, 35).

The minimal type allows minority groups to maintain cultural characteristics only in private or semi-public spheres, while the voluntaristic type permits certain cultural expressions in the public sphere (Van Den Broeck & Foblets 2002, 22). The Belgian integration policy falls under the voluntaristic type but has been criticized for allowing only marginal cultural expressions in the public sphere (Verlot 2001, 35-37).

Since 1974, Belgian policy has been limited to formal immigration matters, like immigrant status, without significant focus on language acquisition or other integration aspects (Van Den Broeck and Foblets 2002, 19-20).

The year 1988 marked a turning point, leading to the division of migration policy into immigration policy (a federal responsibility) and integration policy (managed by communities and regions). In 1989, the Royal Commissariat for Migration Policy proposed an integration concept, later approved by federal and regional governments, emphasizing assimilation where necessary, respect for Western values, and recognition of cultural diversity (Van Den Broeck and Foblets 2002, 22). In 1992, Blommaert and Verschueren criticized the integration and multiculturalism debate, arguing that tolerance ideologies often mask underlying right-wing ideas by judging others based on majority norms, a phenomenon they called "homogeneity." (Foblets and Van Den Broeck 2002, 22-23). Despite sparking new debates, their research had limited impact on policy decisions. Van den Broeck also noted that the government, despite its integration policy, failed to create a fully pluralistic society, improve minority living conditions, or eliminate racism (Verlot 2001, 37).

Belgium is undeniably pluralistic, with officially accepted multicultural discourse. However, mere recognition of multiculturalism is insufficient to enhance societal harmony. Achieving the goals of migration policy aligned with cultural pluralism remains a significant challenge (Van Den Broeck and Foblets 2002, 41).

2.2. Diverse Approaches to Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a recognized reality, but solutions for managing it remain complex and varied. There are few places where cultural diversity does not provoke conflicts, and the approaches to handling these conflicts are multiple. There is a general sense of stagnation despite various new proposals to address the challenges of multiculturalism.

Stevaert (2005) and Abicht (2005, 17-18) discuss the concept of "active pluralism," which goes beyond mere tolerance. Tolerance is seen as a first step, but not sufficient to create an open and pleasant society for all. Abicht emphasizes that tolerance without real contact leads to indifference, while Stevaert argues that tolerance does not stimulate curiosity. Both advocate for active engagement between cultures and the development of curiosity that leads to openness and dialogue (Abicht 2005, 17-18). Magits argues that active pluralism must occur at three levels: public policies, life perspectives, and citizens. He uses the term "intercultural" to emphasize the necessity of interaction, not just coexistence of cultures. Dialogue is essential for mutual understanding and knowledge (Abicht 2005, 25). Youssef Souissi views active pluralism as a necessary compromise, given the inevitability of cultural contact. He provides practical examples, such as the adaptations made by Jewish merchants in Antwerp to keep their shops open on the Sabbath (Abicht 2005, 18). Marc Colpaert argues that tolerance is a result of dialogue, not a starting point. He suggests that dialogue should lead to mutual respect and understanding (Colpaert 2000, 17-31). Wilna A.J. Meijer promotes "open pluralism," which involves recognizing diversity and engaging in dialogue without the intent to convince the other party. She emphasizes the importance of maintaining dialogue and avoiding polarization (Meijer 2003, 73).

2.3. Implementing Active Pluralism in a Multicultural Society: Challenges and Educational Approaches

The challenges posed by an increasingly diverse society are manifold. While the government plays a crucial role in addressing the issues arising from cultural clashes, the implementation of active, genuine, or open pluralism requires participation from all segments of society (Roebben 2000, 7). Education is a key element in this process for several reasons (Rotaru 2021b, 190-196). First, diversity has become the norm in urban schools, significantly impacting the learning process. Ignoring this diversity is futile; instead, it should be actively

incorporated into the curriculum. Second, it is beneficial to teach people from a young age to engage actively with cultural differences, fostering open-minded and critically thinking citizens who can contribute to a tolerant society.

One long-standing idea is intercultural learning, which is not exclusive to Belgium. An example of intercultural learning at the international level can be found within the Youth Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission (Council of Europe And European Commission 2000). They provide publications for youth workers across Europe, focusing on intercultural learning. They recognize the need for further steps to create a better society, aligning with the proposals mentioned earlier. Intercultural learning aims to help individuals understand both others and themselves better, ultimately enabling them to manage the challenges of multicultural reality more effectively (Council of Europe and European Commission 2000).

In Flanders, the idea of active pluralism is gaining traction in education. In community schools, teachers must sign the Pedagogical Project of the Community Education (PPGO), which now includes the active engagement with cultural diversity (Van Den Broeck and Foblets 2002,18). This manifests in open dialogues with students from various cultural and religious backgrounds.

A practical example of this can be seen at the Royal Atheneum of Antwerp, which embraces its cultural diversity as an invitation for active pluralism through dialogue. One theme they have explored is the concept of "time," which is experienced differently across cultures, often causing conflicts. Activities and discussions on this theme, approached with empathy, have led to a better understanding and nuanced perceptions (Heremans 2005, 85-88). Active pluralism can be applied to various societal elements, as cultural diversity is encountered in many contexts. Focusing on cultural differences and engaging in dialogue to understand these differences better is essential (Heremans 2005, 14-15). Cultural differences also bring different worldviews, and addressing these in open dialogues is equally important. The separation of church and state often relegates religious issues to the private sphere, but these beliefs influence public behavior and can lead to conflicts. Thus, it is necessary to include worldviews in the dialogue for a more comprehensive approach to active pluralism (Decoo 2006, 6).

In conclusion, active pluralism is a broad concept that requires deep engagement with different cultures, including their worldviews. Schools play a pivotal role in fostering this dialogue, which should extend to religious education, often referred to as "interreligious learning." Although still in its infancy compared to intercultural learning, interreligious learning addresses the complex nature of religious dialogues, highlighting the need for its integration into educational frameworks.

3. Active Pluralism At School: Interreligious Learning As A New Form Of Religious Education

3.1. Secularization and Religious Education in Schools

The text explores the necessity of religious education in schools within the context of secularization and religious pluralism. It questions whether religion still has a place in the school curriculum or if the explicit presence of diverse religious views is necessary for a comprehensive education.

Secularization (Rotaru 2006, 251-266) has had a significant impact over the last forty years, Belgium has experienced a significant decline in religious practices, largely due to scientific advancements that have diminished trust in religion (Roebben 2003, 93). This trend was further solidified by media representation, presenting secularization as a general phenomenon. Despite the decrease in practicing Catholics, Belgium is still perceived as a predominantly Catholic country (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven 2007, 1-152).

3.1.1. Religious Pluralism and the Need for Religious

Secularization is just one factor causing tension regarding religious education. Although many have left Catholicism, not all have become non-believers; some have transitioned to other religions or adopted new religious movements. Additionally, immigration has brought even greater religious diversity, with Muslims forming the second largest religious group after Christians.

This diversity is also visible in schools, making monoreligious learning no longer viable. Instead, multireligious learning is proposed, intended to be neutral and objective, providing students with knowledge about various religions and worldviews without imposing specific beliefs. However, this approach is criticized for tending to promote indifference rather than genuine engagement (Alexander 2000, 47-55; Vermeer 2003, 114-115).

Multireligious learning is contested for potentially leading to a secularization of religious education, depriving students of authentic religious experiences and reducing religion to mere objective information. This relativistic teaching method fails to offer deep religious formation, which is necessary in a religiously diverse society (Vermeer 2003, 115).

3.1.2. The Proposal for Interreligious Learning: Integrating Diversity in Religious Education

The text proposes a new approach to religious education called interreligious learning, addressing the shortcomings of traditional monoreligious and multireligious education. Monoreligious learning, which focuses on a single religion, is no longer relevant in a pluralistic society where no religion holds a monopoly. Multireligious learning, while providing objective knowledge about various religions, often leads to indifference rather than genuine openness, and it loses touch with the core religious aspect of education. Interreligious learning aims to overcome these issues by emphasizing the subjective experiences of students, thereby reintegrating the religious element into religious education.

3.1.3. Key Points of Interreligious Learning

Interreligious learning does not represent a specific subject in the curriculum but rather a way of approaching religious education and integrating diversity into the broader educational context. This approach places students at the center of the learning process, encouraging active engagement with religious diversity rather than passive reception of information. Dialogue becomes both a method and a goal, with students actively participating in their own educational journey (Roebben 2003, 87). Roebben emphasizes two main competencies that interreligious learning seeks to develop:

1. Identity Formation: Assisting students in forming their religious or worldview-related identities. (Roebben 2003, 8, 86-87, 97-98).
2. Meaningful Dialogue: Enabling students to engage in open and meaningful conversations about religious and worldview topics (Roebben 2003, 104).

3.2. Implementation and Challenges

Interreligious learning should be integrated into the overall educational approach to diversity, extending beyond religious education to include intercultural learning. Despite its potential, this approach faces challenges and unresolved issues, particularly regarding how to incorporate subjective experiences and religious truth claims into education. However, it is seen as a way to develop students' abilities to engage with diverse worldviews and form their own religious identities (Roebben 2003, 8).

Bakker highlights the importance of considering the student's initial situation, including their existing knowledge and cultural background, to create a meaningful learning experience. He advocates for "learning in context", where the relevance of new information is linked to the student's prior experiences and the real world (Bakker 2000, 105-109).

While the primary goal of interreligious learning is to support students in their personal development, dialogue also serves as a crucial tool for learning. Effective interreligious

dialogue requires openness and commitment from students, allowing them to defend their views and engage with others. This process not only aids in identity formation but also fosters mutual understanding and cooperation among students (Vermeer 2003, 118).

Cornille (2000, 65-68) emphasizes the necessity of both openness and commitment in interreligious dialogue. Students must be open to viewpoints that differ from their own while remaining committed to their beliefs. This balance allows for a meaningful exchange of ideas and helps students understand and respect different religious traditions.

In conclusion, interreligious learning offers a dynamic and inclusive approach to religious education, aiming to create a more engaged and tolerant student body. It combines elements of monoreligious and multireligious learning, emphasizing personal experience and active participation to address the complexities of a pluralistic society.

4. Motivations and Challenges in Interreligious Dialogue: A Multifaith Perspective

4.1 Openness and Closedness of Religious Traditions: Are Religions Ready for Mutual Enrichment?

The world's religions have always been subjects of debate and analysis, especially when it comes to their openness to interreligious dialogue and learning. The central question is whether religions are willing and prepared to engage in such dialogue, thus bringing mutual benefits. In the context of increasing modernization and secularization, this issue becomes even more pertinent.

4.1.1. Interreligious Dialogue: A One-Way Street?

In theory, the concept of interreligious dialogue is often promoted in various fields such as politics, education, and cultural institutions. However, implementing these initiatives faces a complicated reality: for dialogue to occur, all parties involved must be open and willing to participate. In most cases, interreligious dialogue initiatives seem to come from a Christian perspective.

In his work, *Religieus opvoeden in een multiculturele samenleving*, Roebben (2000) highlights that while religious education in Flanders has become more open in recent decades, it remains heavily influenced by the Catholic tradition. Similarly, Mohamed Ajouaou argues that interreligious dialogue initiatives are often dominated by Christians, who do not always receive an equivalent response from other religions (Roebben 2003, 100).

Ajouaou (Mohamed Ajouaou, Morocco, 1968) studied theology at the University of Amsterdam. He works as a consultant at Prisma Brabant to strengthen social cohesion between different (religious) groups) views this imbalance as a manifestation of Christian modesty, where Christians, although extending a hand to other religions, do not always receive the same openness in return. This situation is partly explained by the fact that Christianity remains the predominant and well-established religion in Belgium and the Netherlands (Ajouaou 2003).

4.1.2. Motivations for Dialogue: Theology versus Secularization

There are various reasons why Christianity seeks to engage in interreligious dialogues. One reason is secularization. Confronted with modernization and a declining number of believers, the church may feel the need to open up to other religions to survive. On the other hand, Christian theologians like Roebben argue that dialogue is rooted in the communicative nature of Christianity, which sees God as an entity desiring connection with people (Roebben 2003, 101). Logister (2000, 168-169) discusses the official position of the Vatican, which, through the documents of the Second Vatican Council, has promoted religious freedom and the recognition of positive elements in other religious traditions. This represents a theological openness to dialogue, emphasizing respect and appreciation for the values of other religions.

4.1.3. *Islamic Education: Between Tradition and Modernity*

In contrast, Islam's stance towards interreligious dialogue and multicultural education is often perceived as more defensive. Meijer, in her study *Kleur(en) (be)kennen* (2003), observes that Islam exhibits strong resistance to multiculturalism in education. This is explained by the negative experiences of Islamic countries with Western political and cultural influences. However, Meijer also identifies possibilities for openness within Islamic education, highlighting the use of reason and dialectical methods in Islamic religious teaching since the 10th century. This suggests that, despite a strict separation between modern and religious knowledge, there is potential for dialogue and mutual learning (Meijer 2003, 73-84).

Daniël de Smet and Jan van Reeth, in their work *De islam is modern* (2001), argue that Islam has maintained continuity in Greek and Christian influences, indicating a latent openness to reason and science. This suggests that, despite traditional opposition to certain external influences, Islam is not entirely closed to dialogue and mutual enrichment (De Smet & Van Reeth 2001, 59-60).

Smart, in various works, argues for a critical and open attitude of religions towards science and other religious traditions. He emphasizes that a genuine and fruitful interreligious dialogue requires religions to engage in constructive criticism and reevaluate their own dogmas in light of new knowledge and perspectives (Smart 1984d, 1-3). Smart sees religious openness as an opportunity for mutual enrichment, not a threat to the essence of faith. He argues that a modern, liberal, and critical attitude can significantly benefit religious understanding and peaceful coexistence in a globalized and pluralistic world (Smart 1983c, 4). The openness and closedness of religious traditions towards interreligious dialogue is a complex issue, influenced by theological, historical, and cultural factors. While there are significant differences between Christianity and Islam regarding openness to other religions, both religious traditions have the potential to engage in fruitful dialogue. It is essential that each religion is willing to learn from the other and adapt to the challenges and changes of the modern world.

4.2. *Prejudices and the Influence of Teachers' Religious Identity*

The initiative for interreligious dialogue and learning typically originates from a Christian perspective. While there are noble proposals for a pluralistic approach to religious education, these often stem from a Christian framework. The goal of engaging openly with various religions in the classroom is often hampered by prejudices based on incorrect knowledge.

Jan van Wiele discusses various forms of prejudice in *Religieus opvoeden in een multiculturele samenleving* (2000), illustrating them with examples from Islam. He identifies five main forms of prejudice: omission of data, the relevance of selected facts, stereotypes, dichotomies, and excessive simplifications (Van Wiele 2000, 121-133).

1. **Omission of Data:** Important contributions of Islam to Western culture, such as Avicenna's transmission of Aristotle's philosophy, are often overlooked, creating a skewed perception.
2. **Relevance of Selected Facts:** Certain facts, like the stereotype of Muslims' midday siesta, are often misrepresented, leading to an incorrect view of Islamic culture.
3. **Stereotypes:** Simplification and generalization result in stereotypes, such as the image of Muslim women as having no rights, which ignores the complexity and regional variations in their status.
4. **Dichotomies:** Black-and-white comparisons, such as Christianity versus Islam, fail to acknowledge the significant similarities between these religions, such as monotheism and periods of fasting.
5. **Excessive Simplifications:** Simplistic explanations, like portraying Islam as inherently warlike due to misunderstandings about "Holy War," ignore the complex historical and cultural factors at play (Roebben 2003, 100-101)

These prejudices can undermine the effectiveness of interreligious education and reinforce negative stereotypes.

4.2.1. Teachers' Religious Identity in the Classroom

In *Kleur(en) (be)kennen*, Van Crombrugge, Vanobbergen and Vansieleghem (2003, 142) examine the challenge of teachers' religious identities in Flemish schools. Teachers are often expected to either conform to the school's religious outlook or suppress their own beliefs to avoid indoctrination. This creates a tension between the teacher's authenticity and the neutrality required in the classroom.

Authenticity is crucial for a teacher's authority. However, the expression of personal religious beliefs in class is often discouraged to prevent indoctrination. The authors argue that religious identity is dynamic and evolves with new experiences, suggesting that it should not be entirely suppressed in educational settings (Van Crombrugge, Vanobbergen and Vansieleghem 2003,149). They propose that teachers should support students in their search for their own beliefs. This means acknowledging the teacher's religious perspective without imposing it. Teachers should model the exploration of religious identity, demonstrating how personal beliefs can be questioned and developed over time (Van Crombrugge, Vanobbergen and Vansieleghem 2003, 137-149).

Smart also addresses the issue of teachers' religious identities in his works. In *Crushing the Clichés about Comparative Religion* (1972), he argues that Christian teachers can indeed teach about other religions without bias. He emphasizes that religious education should shift from "teaching that" to "teaching how," focusing on understanding and analyzing religious beliefs rather than preaching them (Smart 1972, 5).

Smart (1972, 220) suggests adopting a methodical agnosticism during the descriptive phase of teaching about religions, setting aside personal beliefs to accurately represent the religious experiences of others. He argues that empathy and imagination are essential for understanding and conveying the inner feelings and convictions of adherents of different religions. In *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (1968), Smart states that the primary goal of education is to teach students about various traditions and enable them to form their own beliefs. He acknowledges that teachers' beliefs might influence students but insists that this should happen through open, unbiased lessons that present multiple perspectives (Smart 1968, 96-99).

The challenge of integrating teachers' religious identities into interreligious education is significant but manageable. Teachers should be allowed to express their beliefs as part of an authentic search for truth, serving as role models for students. However, they must avoid imposing their beliefs and should present religious education in a balanced and open manner. The balance between authenticity and neutrality is crucial for fostering a pluralistic and inclusive educational environment.

4.3. The Role of Non-Religious Traditions in Interreligious Learning

In previous discussions, we examined whether interreligious learning might inadvertently start from a specific framework with certain assumptions. Christianity, particularly Catholicism in Belgium, often influences religious education in schools. However, this influence has significantly diminished over recent decades. Nowadays, many schools, teachers, and students come from diverse religious backgrounds or even non-religious traditions. Some reject faith, some adopt secular humanist views, while others choose different religions. This section focuses on the place of non-religious traditions in interreligious learning. Interreligious dialogue and learning are usually thought of as interactions between different religions. However, interreligious learning often involves participants for whom religiosity or spirituality is not part of their identity. This includes those indifferent to religion and those who consciously choose a non-religious worldview.

4.3.1. *Indifference to Religion in Interreligious Learning*

Firstly, it's essential to consider whether students indifferent to religion and worldview identity benefit from interreligious learning. I believe they do, for several reasons that align with the objectives of interreligious learning. Interreligious learning aims to make students aware of the existence of various religions in an objective, lively, and honest way, using information from the believers themselves. This awareness is necessary due to the reality of religious diversity in our society. Secularization has significantly changed the landscape, but it has not eradicated religion. Spirituality remains strong, and encounters with once-distant religions are now part of our daily lives. Therefore, even students indifferent to any form of worldview need knowledge about these different traditions to navigate their interactions (Roebben 2003, 90).

Additionally, interreligious learning helps students in their search for identity. Roebben (2003) argues that due to secularization and the abundance of meaning systems, the processes of "searching" and "choosing" have become crucial for young people. Although religion is no longer a given, many young people still seek moral and worldview perspectives on life questions. Even those seemingly indifferent to religion are often searching for meaning, making the identity development aspect of interreligious learning relevant to them (Roebben 2003, 90-93).

4.3.2. *The Involvement of Non-Religious Worldviews*

Students with a background in non-religious traditions or those who have consciously chosen a secular path also need consideration. Can and should they engage in dialogue with those from religious traditions? The Humanist-Secular Association (HVV) provides an example of a non-religious tradition open to interreligious dialogue. This association emphasizes openness, critical inquiry, and respect for individuals, although not necessarily for their ideas. The HVV promotes active pluralism and seeks dialogue with other traditions, recognizing the importance of diversity and mutual respect (Cornille 2000, 65-68).

4.3.3. *Ninian Smart's Contribution*

Ninian Smart's work is pivotal in highlighting the importance of including secular ideologies in the study of religion. In *Secular Ideologies: How Do They Figure in Religious Studies Course?* (1991), Smart argues that both religious and secular traditions should be studied together due to their inevitable interactions and the similarities in their structures (Smart 1991a, 169-170). Smart identifies several reasons for incorporating secular traditions into religious studies:

1. *Similar Structures:* Both religious and secular traditions have narrative, experiential, ritual, institutional, doctrinal, and ethical dimensions. Understanding these similarities helps in comprehending their roles in society (Smart 1987, 292, 298).
2. *Unavoidable Interaction:* Secular and religious traditions constantly influence each other. Studying them together allows for a more comprehensive understanding of their dynamics (Smart 1987, 167).
3. *Symbolic Analysis:* Many secular traditions have symbolic and ritualistic aspects, such as national ceremonies or scientific practices. Analyzing these can reveal deeper values and beliefs (Smart 1987, 168).
4. *Educational Value:* Teaching about secular ideologies alongside religions provides a broader perspective, helping students understand the full spectrum of worldviews they may encounter (Smart 1987, 171).

Smart's approach, termed "worldview analysis," advocates for studying both religious and non-religious traditions holistically. This inclusive perspective is crucial in a pluralistic society where students need to understand diverse belief systems and ideologies (Smart 1987, 172). Interreligious learning should encompass non-religious traditions, reflecting the pluralistic reality of modern Belgian society. Students indifferent to religion or those with secular worldviews benefit from learning about various traditions, as they will inevitably

encounter them. The identity development process, central to interreligious learning, is equally important for these students. Ninian Smart's worldview analysis underscores the necessity of including secular ideologies in religious education. By doing so, we provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the diverse beliefs and values shaping our world. Interreligious learning, therefore, should not only focus on religious traditions but also on non-religious ones, fostering a truly inclusive and pluralistic educational environment.

4.4. Is Interreligious Learning Age-Dependent?

In discussions about interreligious learning, a central concern is determining the appropriate age to introduce this type of education. Experts in religious pedagogy and religious studies question whether interreligious learning should begin only in secondary education or if it can also be introduced in primary and even preschool education. A related question is whether students need to have a well-defined religious identity before engaging in interreligious learning. There is also concern that young people may not be ready to be exposed to diverse religious perspectives, which could lead to excessive relativism.

Roebben, in his work "Religious Education in a Multicultural Society" (2000), argues that interreligious learning becomes effective only when students can reflect on their own religious identity, suggesting that the age of 16 is the right time to reap the benefits of this education. However, he acknowledges that younger children can also be exposed to religious diversity in an appropriate manner. Roebben emphasizes the need for further psychological research to determine the optimal time for children to effectively manage exposure to different religions (Roebben 2000, 99).

The book "Young Children Don't Discriminate?!", edited by Anke van Keulen, demonstrates that education about diversity and equality can start in preschool activities. Many European countries have programs like "Diversity and Equality" and "Anti-Bias Work" that promote inclusivity and understanding of differences from an early age (Van Keulen 2004, 7-8, 10). Ido Abram proposes the ABCD model for intercultural learning, which is also applicable to very young children. This model includes autobiography, biography, conflict, and dialogue as central elements of intercultural education, highlighting that the fundamental elements are present from a very young age (Abram 2004, 37, 50).

Ter Avest, in her longitudinal study begun in 1990, found that the differences in religious perception between Muslim and Christian children are not significant in primary education but become apparent during adolescence. Her research suggests that children exposed to interreligious education develop a hybrid view of God, a phenomenon that emerges only after the age of 12. Ter Avest also emphasizes the significant influence of parents on children's religious identity, but acknowledges the essential role of schools in broadening children's religious perspectives (Ter Avest 2003, 329-332).

Smart (1972, 5), in his work "Crushing the Clichés about Comparative Religion," argues that pluralistic religious education is essential, even for young children, because religion is an integral part of life. He contends that monoreligious education fails to adequately address children's questions and that pluralistic religious education better prepares them for a diverse society. While there are divergent views on the optimal time (Rotaru 2011,5) to start interreligious learning, most experts agree that it plays a crucial role in shaping religious identity and fostering tolerance. It is evident that further research is needed to definitively answer this question, but the importance of the subject is indisputable. Thus, considering the age and psychological context of students is essential for the success of interreligious dialogue in schools.

5. Interreligious Learning in Flanders

Interreligious learning as a new proposal for religious education is already prominent in both popular and scientific literature. It is clear that there is a desire to adapt religious education in

schools to the changing society and the needs of students. This section explores whether interreligious learning is already being practiced by examining religious education in Catholic and community schools through their religious education curricula. These curricula serve as guides and instruments for schools and teachers, but ultimately, it is up to them to decide what and how to teach in religious classes. Therefore, practical examples of interreligious learning will be evaluated against the theoretical framework of interreligious learning.

5.1. Interreligious Learning in Religious Education Curricula?

5.1.1. Catholic Education

The "Werkplan Godsdienst voor het Kleuteronderwijs" (2001) and the "Leerplannen Godsdienst voor het Lager en Secundair Onderwijs" (2000) in Flanders will be the starting points to see if interreligious learning is partially present in Catholic education in Flanders. Before delving deeper, it is interesting to consider the Catholic education system's search for its identity. They too are feeling the effects of changes such as pluralism and secularization. Catholic schools also face students and teachers indifferent to religion or who explicitly reject it or practice a religion other than Catholicism. Therefore, it is important for them to redefine their identity and goals in response to this changing climate. In "Ander Geloof" (2005), Mieke van Hecke, Director-General of the Flemish Secretariat of Catholic Education (VSKO), discusses this search within Catholic education. She states that education should never be a neutral endeavor, as questions about beliefs always play a role in the student's identity formation (Van Hecke 2005, 237).

Catholic schools still start from a Christian tradition, but how this relates to actual educational practices is hard to define. Van Hecke views this lack of definitive answers on the relationship between beliefs and education as an advantage, as it forces Catholic education to continually question and rethink its position. However, certain anchors remain in the identity of Catholic education, such as acknowledging societal plurality, positively appreciating religious diversity, and starting from the student's desire for authenticity, all while maintaining a Christian background. Van Hecke believes that Catholic education embraces a dynamic, relational, and pluralistic concept of identity for both the institution and individuals involved. This dynamic nature is reflected in the continuous redefinition of their starting points and goals based on external changes. The only constant in the identity of Catholic education remains the Christian tradition, but there is a clear shift towards recognizing and valuing pluralism in recent years (Van Hecke 2005, 225-245).

A first expression of this redefinition process can be found in the vision text from 1996, written by a commission appointed by the bishops, which is part of the religious education curricula for preschool, primary, and secondary education. This text, a revision of an earlier vision, now includes references to cultural and religious pluralism. The current text views religious education mainly as a communicative activity where students primarily gain knowledge through dialogue. The entire process of the religious class is formative, not just the information transferred from teacher to student. Personal views of both teacher and student help shape the lesson. Additionally, this form of religious education aims to prepare students for dialogue with believers of other religions. While the Catholic tone remains strong, the curriculum recognizes the reality of pluralism and the need for students to develop communicative skills for future interactions with other religions (Commissie In Opdracht Van De Bisschoppen 1996, 13-17).

In examining the curricula for preschool, primary, and secondary education, it is clear that pluralism is acknowledged but only to a limited extent. In preschool, themes related to the child's spiritual growth, such as trust and connections with themselves, others, nature, and communities, are reinforced by Christian stories, symbols, and images. Trust, for example, is illustrated through God's, Jesus', and Mary's trust, always accessible through prayer. This

approach seems closed to other beliefs, but the curriculum's final point shows some openness. (Online Werkplan Godsdienst Voor Het Kleuteronderwijs 2001).

The last theme requires preschool teachers to also address the beliefs, symbols, and celebrations of other religions present in the classroom. Children participate in activities such as prayers led by the teacher and short ceremonies from other religions, fostering respect and openness from a young age.

In primary education, attention is given to the societal significance of other religions and the implications of religious diversity. However, the focus remains primarily on Roman Catholicism, with some attention to religions clearly present in society, such as Islam and Judaism, and certain non-religious traditions. It is up to the teacher to decide when to introduce this diversity, but the curriculum encourages addressing it in multicultural classrooms with every theme (Online Leerplan Godsdienst Voor Het Basis Onderwijs 2000).

In secondary education, the approach shifts to start from religious pluralism, working around themes such as "time" or "key figures in stories," covering Christianity and (to a lesser extent) other religions and possibly non-religious traditions. In the second grade, identity formation is central, where students place their personal convictions within the context of religious pluralism and understand that this is a process of making choices, involving conflict and dialogue. In the third grade, the focus shifts to the Christian tradition's role in students' religious identities and its place among other beliefs in society (Online Leerplan Godsdienst Voor Het Secundair Onderwijs 2000).

The curricula indeed recognize cultural and religious pluralism but integrate it to a limited extent. Some Christian critics argue that these curricula devote too much attention to other beliefs. Jürgen Mettepenningen in *Interworldview Dialogue and the Roman Catholic Religious Education Course in Secondary Education in Flanders*, he proposes splitting the two hours of religious education per week: one hour for the student's personal experience, including other beliefs if relevant, and one hour for in-depth knowledge of Christianity. While I agree that distinguishing between informing and personal searching is beneficial, Mettepenningen's idea of focusing solely on Christianity overlooks the fact that Catholicism is taught for nine years in primary and even preschool education (Mettepenningen 2006, 137-153). Herman De Dijn, as previously mentioned in a debate with Rik Pinxten, also opposes "active pluralism" in Catholic education, fearing the new curricula emphasize pluralism too much. He argues that young people should firmly root in one tradition before encountering other beliefs, a process he believes ends only at the end of secondary education. De Dijn essentially denies the pluralistic reality of young people's lives (De Dijn 2004, 15). Thus, while there is some recognition of pluralism in Catholic religious education, the integration is limited and often debated. The question of how to balance a strong Christian foundation with the recognition and appreciation of other beliefs remains a challenge for Catholic education in Flanders.

5.2. Direct Forms of Interreligious Learning in Flemish Education

Interreligious learning is frequently discussed among teachers, administrators, and others in both Catholic and community education systems. Therefore, it is interesting to explore how some schools and teachers personally implement interreligious learning. Ultimately, curricula provide a broad framework, allowing schools and teachers significant freedom to apply these guidelines and objectives. Additionally, there is room for cross-disciplinary projects and themes that better align with the content of interreligious learning.

5.2.1. Catholic Education

In Catholic primary education, the "In the Spotlight" project is a collaboration between the Flemish Association of Catholic Primary Education (VVKBaO) and the Faculty of Theology at KU Leuven. Initial projects focused on themes like Sinterklaas and Christmas, targeting both preschool and the first grade of primary education. These projects aim to initiate a

dialogue about contemporary issues among teachers and between teachers and students. The approach avoids turning religious lessons into pre-packaged plans, instead emphasizing the unique starting points of each classroom and student. These projects allow for integrating various religious beliefs present in the classroom into the lesson topics, fostering enrichment through communication between different religious perspectives (Website Gemeenschapsonderwijs 2005, 1). "We believe that Catholic schools can play an important forward-looking role in our society if they succeed in becoming schools sensitive to religious perspectives: if religious conversations can and may take place at school, both among adults and between adults and children. In other words, if the 'internal religious pluralism' inevitably present in school can evolve into a 'qualitative' pluralism, where there is room for authenticity and critical dialogue" (In De Kijker, Basisonderwijs 2006).

However, the focus remains on the Catholic faith, aiming to help students adhere to it through critical thinking and dialogue with others rather than through superficial acceptance. A notable example of a Catholic school embracing a multi- and even interreligious identity comes from Odette Storms. From 1976 to 1998, she was the principal of Stella Maris, a Catholic school in Genk. In "Interreligious Education in a Multi-religious School" (2000), Storms recounts how interreligious dialogue and learning were central to her approach even before the 1996 vision text by the bishops' commission was published. During her tenure, terms like "interreligious learning" and "interreligious dialogue" were not common, yet they guided her leadership. She challenged the traditional Catholic terminology, advocating for an inclusive interpretation that accommodated the school's multicultural reality. "Out of conviction, we wanted to belong to the Catholic network. In fact, we had an interreligious educational project: on one hand, educating young people towards a religious identity—Christian for Christians, Islamic for Muslims—and on the other hand, together with each other, or in other words, diversity and unity" (Storms 2000, 552-561).

While it is debatable whether Storms' methods align with modern interreligious learning concepts, she supported religious plurality by allowing Islamic religious instruction separate from Christian instruction as early as 1976. The first Islamic teacher was appointed in 1980, promoting multi-religious rather than interreligious learning. Nevertheless, there was interreligious dialogue among teachers. Despite initial skepticism towards the Islamic teacher, open communication fostered collegiality, with the Islamic teacher aiding colleagues in understanding and supporting Muslim students (Storms 2000, 552-561). Storms also promoted interreligious dialogue through annual themes that engaged students and teachers from diverse backgrounds, strengthening the community. She valued both non-religious and religious celebrations, sometimes holding joint events to enhance mutual understanding.

In "Religious Education in a Multicultural Society," Sledsens (2000) discusses using film as a tool for interreligious learning. A religion teacher at Sint-Jozefinstituut Kontich, Sledsens believes that religious education should develop students' religious identities, with the hope that the outcome will be a Christian identity, though this should not be the starting point. He emphasizes dialogue in religious lessons, aligning with the idea of interreligious learning, where communication skills are both an objective and a means to learn about other beliefs. A good religious film, according to Sledsens, does not aim to exhaustively portray a religion but to provide context and perspective through its characters' lives. Documentaries are less effective as they present information objectively rather than engaging the viewer's emotions and understanding (Sledsens 2000, 38).

"A 'good' religious film does not feel the need to show every detail of the depicted religion. It often shows much, but only to better understand the lives of the characters (Sledsens 2000, 139)." A film should evoke emotions and perspectives, allowing students to engage in dialogue with the portrayed viewpoints. Films that depict characters grappling with their own or other beliefs can effectively spark interreligious dialogue in the classroom,

showing that conflict, dialogue, and seeking are integral to religious identity (Sledsens 2000, 135-144).

Interreligious learning as a new proposal for religious education is increasingly prominent in both popular and scientific literature. It reflects the desire to adapt religious education in schools to the changing society and the needs of students. In the context of Catholic education in Flanders, there is a recognition of cultural and religious pluralism, although its integration into educational curricula is limited. Catholic education retains its roots in the Christian tradition, but there is a clear shift towards appreciating religious diversity and encouraging interreligious dialogue. The practical implementation of interreligious learning varies, depending on the initiative of individual schools and teachers. Thus, the challenge remains to find a balance between maintaining a strong Christian foundation and recognizing and appreciating other beliefs (Rotaru 2023, 62-79).

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, direct forms of interreligious learning in Flemish education, particularly within Catholic schools, demonstrate a commitment to integrating diverse religious perspectives. Projects like "In the Spotlight" and the use of film in religious education highlight efforts to foster dialogue and understanding, preparing students for a pluralistic society. In this thesis, we explored the concept of interreligious learning as a new proposal for religious education within the context of active pluralism. We demonstrated how this proposal fits into a broader idea that promotes active interaction among diverse cultures, surpassing passive tolerance.

Part one laid the foundation for understanding the origins of active pluralism. It began with an overview of various approaches to managing cultural diversity in society, emphasizing the importance of open and voluntary dialogue. We highlighted that active pluralism involves not just passive respect for other cultures, but active cooperation and mutual enrichment.

Part two connected the ideas of this modern proposal with previous approaches, underlining the necessity of accurate information and understanding others' perspectives to facilitate dialogue and personal identity development.

Part three discussed the challenges and criticisms of interreligious learning, such as the willingness of other religious traditions to participate, the possibility of understanding others from their own standpoint without preconceptions, the position of the teacher's religious identity, and the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in interreligious learning. Additionally, we considered the age and capabilities of the target audience and attitudes toward theologically irreconcilable issues.

Part four examined the practical implementation of interreligious learning in Flemish schools. First, we analyzed the curricula of Catholic and public education systems, noting that while both recognize religious pluralism, public education seems to make more efforts to integrate this aspect actively into their curriculum. However, despite advocating for active pluralism, there is no true form of interreligious learning, as students are taught separately according to their religious affiliations. Furthermore, we looked at specific initiatives by certain schools or teachers that align with the objectives of interreligious learning.

In conclusion, interreligious learning, like active pluralism, is a relatively recent concept that can be interpreted broadly. It aims to take a step forward in addressing cultural and religious diversity, including in schools. Although there are theoretical proposals and some practical examples that align with these theories, many elements remain open to debate. Further studies in the pedagogical, psychological, theological, and religious studies fields are needed before interreligious learning can be fully integrated into the Flemish education system.

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