The challenge of religious education to deal with past and present Catholicism

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ABSTRACT

Religious education (RE) in secondary schools in the Netherlands is challenged to redefine the educational aims. Concerning this debate, the preference for a cognitive approach is remarkably dominant, not only among scholars but among RE teachers as well. This appeal for a cognitive turn is based upon two hypotheses: first on the presumption of religious blankness among religiously unaffiliated pupils and second on a specific view on the way religious affiliation, religious reflectivity and religious tolerance are intertwined. The current article elaborates on an empirical research that questions both hypotheses. It first discovered the ongoing connection religiously unaffiliated pupils have with a former and conventional type of Catholicism, which impedes the development of their reflective personal religiosity as well as that of their interreligious openness. Second, this investigation revealed that personal connectedness with contemporary Catholic faith encourages these two developments. As such, this research contributes to a nuanced perspective on the chances and bottlenecks within religious learning by religiously unaffiliated and affiliated pupils. Concerning the redefinition of religious educational aims, it provides empirical arguments for a balanced combination of cognitive, attitudinal and experiential aims and advocates a preference for experiential and attitudinal aspects as a didactical starting point.

KEYWORDS

Religious education; religious blankness; religious (non-)affiliation; religious reflectivity; interreligious tolerance

Introduction

Religious diversity within society and school life in the Netherlands challenges religious education (RE). Not only because most scholars and teachers consider the pupils’ competence to deal with such diversity an important educational aim, but also on account of their conflicting views on the most appropriate way to achieve this. The process of redefining religious educational aims manifests two tendencies. Scholars such as Roebben (2012, 2013) and Schweitzer (2007, 2013) have developed experiential and attitudinal approaches to expand the potential of ‘learning from religion’. Others such as Vermeer (2012, 2013) and Sterkens (Sterkens and Vermeer 2012) consider such methods to be outdated. They advocate a predominantly cognitive approach. Their plea does not only contribute to the ongoing academic debate but affects RE teachers in the Netherlands as well: it caused an intensified dialogue about their perspectives on the future of their work.

The current article aims to contribute to this debate based on Dutch research within three Catholic secondary schools by advocating an RE approach that balances the predominantly cognitive approach with the predominantly experiential and attitudinal approach. The first paragraph clarifies that Sterkens’ and Vermeer’s preference for a mainly cognitive approach is based on two assumptions. First of all, there is the assumption that pupils who are not religiously bound are a blank page from a
religious point of view. Second, there is the assumption that religious affiliation, personal religious reflectivity and interreligious openness are interwoven in a specific way. Both assumptions are questionable, according to Dutch research. The second paragraph describes the purpose and methods of this three-phase research among students of three Catholic secondary schools. The third paragraph describes the most important first outcome of the first research phase, namely that not only the affiliated but also the non-affiliated pupils still appear to be strongly connected with the Catholic religion. The fact that the non-affiliated pupils are not religiously blank but are involved in the Catholic religion with positive and negative emotions and associations does not just undermine the hypothesis about religious blankness, but also the one about the way in which religious bonding and religious reflectivity are interwoven. This is clarified in the fourth paragraph, referring to research results from the first phase. Based on these research results, the fifth paragraph shows that the hypothesis about the way in which religious bonding and interreligious openness are interwoven does not hold water. The non-affiliated pupils have solid images of Catholicism which have their origins in pre-conciliar conventional Catholicism. The sixth paragraph presents the results of the second and third phases and clarifies how the solidified images of the Catholic religion among non-affiliated pupils come to light and are challenged by learning by encounter, and that such learning also promotes the acquisition of religious knowledge: it takes the didactic starting situation of emotional imprisonment seriously. The seventh paragraph reflects on the significance of the results for the pedagogical and didactic approach within RE.

The plea for a cognitive turn

Sterkens and Vermeer (2012) argue that religious educational intentions to contribute to the development of pupils’ religious identity should be replaced by providing them with knowledge. Their argument manifests three motives. The first motive is the vulnerability of RE as a school subject. Because RE lacks a shared and recognisable academic profile, it is not considered a ‘real’ cognitive subject and is regarded to be destined to disappear (Vermeer 2013). The second motive refers to the changed religious landscape, characterised by the increase of religious illiteracy: most pupils are unfamiliar with the main religious–cultural themes, narratives, symbols and practices. Drawing from several studies (De Hart 1990; Vermeer and Pieper 2001; Becker and De Hart 2006; Bernts, Dekker, and De Hart 2007), Sterkens and Vermeer state that most young people grow up in a secular environment: they are not familiar with traditional and institutional forms of religion, nor are they interested in alternative forms of religion or spirituality. Their religious illiteracy contributes to the pupils’ preference for a cognitive religious educational approach which distances religiosity from their own lives (Sterkens and Vermeer 2012; Vermeer 2013; 89). Sterkens’ and Vermeer’s third motive concerns the religious variety within RE classes. Current classes do not only include a large number of pupils without a personal interest in religion or spirituality but include religiously involved pupils as well. Within such mixed groups, discussing the meaning of religion for one’s personal life might contribute not to an increase but to a decrease of social cohesion and understanding within the class group. RE oriented towards cognitive aims is already complex enough (Sterkens and Vermeer 2012, 68–72).

Concerning this risk, they express a specific view on the attitudes of religiously affiliated and unaffiliated pupils. They refer to Bruce’s theory that present institutional religiosity is characterised by strictness (Bruce summarised by Sterkens and Vermeer 2012, 56). In this theory, affiliated religiosity is typified by an awareness of religious truth (absolutism), by a required commitment concerning religious views and morals (conformity) and by the expectation of a social life expressing religiosity and conversion (fanatism). Based on some traces of religious strictness among young church members recognised by Becker and De Hart (2006), Sterkens and Vermeer (2012, 68 - 71) expect that the religiosity of affiliated pupils answers to the strictness of the religion they adhere to. This forms a risk when RE is oriented towards attitudinal and affective aims. Sterkens and Vermeer derive from Bruce’s theory to underpin their plea: a cognitive approach prevents risky discussions about personal religious involvements in RE classes.
Their perspective on the pupils’ views and attitudes is rather specific: religious affiliation disables the pupils’ competences to develop a personal religious identity characterised by critical thinking and interreligious openness. In contrast, religious non-affiliation is characterised by indifference (towards a personal religious involvement) and openness (towards knowledge of religions and religious phenomena). Religiously unaffiliated pupils are considered individualised people who construct their personally chosen views and attitudes, not obstructed by any religious affiliation. Religious blankness seems to be their starting point.

Not only the assumption of such an opposite correlation can be questioned, the hypothesis of pupils’ religious blankness is debatable as well. According to the intergenerational family research of Elshof (2012) concerning the development of religiosity among affiliated and unaffiliated Roman Catholics in the Netherlands, individual religiosity is strongly connected to religious affiliation and to family ties. Elshof’s perception that an individual’s religious ties contribute to their religious openness and tolerance disproves the opposite assumption of Sterkens and Vermeer. Moreover, her observation that the individual religiosity is affected by family ties in implicit, embodied and collective ways disputes their hypothesis about pupils’ religious blankness. The disputability of the assumption of religious blankness is supported by the perspective of historical research as well. Hellemans (2003, 12–13) points to the strong religious involvement of Dutch Catholics. The idiomatic expression that Dutch Catholics are ‘more Catholic than the Pope himself’ refers to their self-evident religious participation during the first decades of the past century, preceding the Second Vatican Council. Hellemans clarifies that the decades following Vatican II show a continued religious involvement, articulated in a broad and enthusiastic search for alternative religious liturgy and ethics, also known as ‘the Dutch disease’. This religious participation was manifested in an ongoing post-conciliar religious involvement. Also from this historical perspective, it is unlikely that the religiousness of the elder generations has not influenced the religious views and attitudes of current youngsters at all.

An empirical research

The hypothesis about the pupils’ religious literacy and illiteracy as well as their capacity to deal with religious diversity is assumed rather than empirically substantiated. For that reason, this paragraph describes an empirical research among pupils attending secondary catholic schools in the Netherlands conducted by Elshof, in which she continues her research into the development of religiosity by investigating the connection between the individual religiosity and institutional and generational links. The research aims to answer two questions. First of all, it aims to explore what the visions and attitudes of the pupils regarding religiosity and religious diversity look like, whether these visions and attitudes demonstrate personal reflectivity and how their reflectivity, visions and attitudes are interwoven with their ecclesial involvement or with the former ecclesial involvement of their families. This provides a better insight into the accuracy of the assumptions of religious blankness and of the relationship between religious bonding, religious reflectivity and interreligious openness.

Because it is plausible that an influence of Catholicity (if any) particularly affects the religious–educational landscape in traditionally Roman Catholic areas, the empirical research was conducted in the southern regions of the Netherlands, where Catholicism used to be the dominant religion. A possible correlation has the biggest chance of being recognised in these areas.

The research secondly intended to explore if and how the pupils’ views and attitudes transformed through the encounter with young affiliated Catholics. This provides insight into the significance of an experiential and attitudinal approach for RE, which is aimed at knowledge acquisition.

This research, which was conducted in the spring of 2011, aimed at pupils attending three catholic secondary schools in the southern regions of the Netherlands. The pupils mainly came from former Catholic families. It applied a mixed-method research design comprising of three phases (Baarda, De Goede, and Teunissen 1995). The first phase included a questionnaire answered by 82 pupils attending the fifth year of pre-university educational classes (age 16–17). The
questionnaire was distributed during RE class. It comprised two themes. It asked the pupils about their personal vision, attitude, experiences and commitment towards religion in general. It also asked the pupils to write down their personal associations with the Catholic religion: first those with the Catholic religion in general and then those with aspects of this religion: religious faith, opinions, church services, norms and values, rituals, experiences, practices and community (Van Dijk-Groeneboer et al. 2010). A week later, the second part of the research followed. This section included a meeting between secondary school pupils and three Catholic theology students in which the significance of being faithful for one’s personal and social life was thematised. The meeting consisted of the pupils watching a short film which gave an impression of the significance of personal religiosity in the lives of the students. This was followed by a discussion between the pupils and the students about existential and religious themes evoked by the films. The researcher was present in a participatory observatory manner. This research method was opted for in order to gain a deeper insight into the meaning of the answers that the pupils gave in the questionnaire. Moreover, it could provide insight into the effect that the meeting and the dialogue with religious peers had on the religious reflection, vision and attitude of the pupils. It included various ways of collecting information: the observation by the researcher and the RE teachers of the pupils, the reporting by the researcher and the RE teachers and the exchange regarding these observations and reports between the researcher and the RE teachers. This whole was supplemented by follow-up interviews between the researcher and the teachers about the teachers’ vision on the meaning of the meeting for the pupils (Maso and Smaling 1998).

The third part of the research included another questionnaire, which was conducted 2 weeks later. This questionnaire asked the pupils to reflect on the meeting in the classroom. They were asked to describe how they looked back on it, what they considered valuable in the meeting and what they did not and whether the meeting influenced their vision and attitude towards religion. This third part was complementary to the second part, in the sense that it ascertained pupils’ personal reflection on their own views and attitudes towards religion and in what way the class meeting had an effect (Maso and Smaling 1998; Baarda, De Goede, and Teunissen 1995).

**Catholicism and religious blankness**

The question ‘Do you consider yourself a religious person?’ was answered negatively by 62 of the 82 pupils and affirmatively by 20 pupils. The negative responses include two types: the unreligious pupils who are clear about their non-religiousness (50) and the doubting pupils (12) who imagine that there might be something such as ‘a higher power’. The 20 affirmative answers comprise 14 religiously unaffiliated pupils and six pupils who consider themselves religious in relation to an institutional religion (four Catholics, one Protestant, one Muslim). These four types of responses resulted in a plausible distinction of a religiously unaffiliated group of 76 pupils, comprising the unreligious and the unaffiliated religious responses, and a small group of six affiliated pupils.

A closer look at the responses shows that the unaffiliated and the affiliated perspectives share a certain connection with institutional religion. Explanations such as ‘I am not religious because I do not attend Mass’ or ‘I believe in my own way sometimes, but I have nothing to do with the church and priests and so on’ as well as ‘I have my own way of believing and praying’ illustrate Schweitzer’s observation (2007, 92) that adolescents’ religiosity is characterised by a distinction between their own point of view and the institutional perspective. However, these pupils’ responses do not refer to institutional religions in general. Their vocabulary as well as some views and attitudes express a specific connection with Catholicism. Instead of blankness or irrelevance, the unaffiliated pupils’ responses express a relationship with Catholicism: in negative and positive ways. The negativity first concerns former hierarchical and institutional aspects and elucidates their distrust towards the assumed religious endeavour to influence the social and religious lives of others in an oppressive way. Religions cause social trouble, obstruct development and threaten people’s freedom and individuality. Religiosity hardly seems compatible with a scientific, mature and independent attitude
and lifestyle. The unaffiliated pupils ventilate respect for the role religion might play in people’s personal lives. Yet, this respect is based upon their idea of a harmless contemporary Catholicism: ‘In churches people get the experience of not being on their own; they feel respected’. The negative associations (mediaeval crusades, indulgence practices, the separate burying of non-baptised children and the power and status of priests) are primarily accompanied by expressions of emotion.

For example, pupils who stress their lack of interest in religion by answering ‘no’ to almost every question and accentuate their disapproval by underlining their ‘no’-s by exclamation marks and capitals express a strongly negative, almost allergic emotional involvement.

Next to this negativity, the unaffiliated responses often mention two positive Catholic aspects. First, there is the liturgical and ritual repertoire to which pupils wish to have the opportunity of making an appeal. This also holds true for non-religious reasons or backgrounds. Attending Mass (Christmas, marriage, funeral) ‘not for religious reasons but because of my family’ serves the aim of feeling connected with one’s family. Celebrating this kinship in church provides an undefined but special touch: ‘It is more real’. The second positive Catholic aspect concerns values, which most pupils consider highly important. However, their appraisal expresses two characteristics. The first feature is their idea that these values should be shared and respected in order to realise social cohesion. The second feature is substantive emptiness. Exceptions apart (‘respect’ and ‘people are equal’), the pupils lack content to base their appreciation upon. These features arouse the impression of an obvious, self-evident and non-discussed pattern in which common values are not only simply considered ‘normal’ but in which the ‘normal’ has become normative as well.

Overall, the responses of the unaffiliated pupils contradict the hypothesis of religious blankness. On the one hand, their attitudes are characterised by emotions of rejection and of negative associations. However, this is not based on personal experiences but on images from the past that have been transferred to them, and on an allergic reaction to these images that was transmitted from the past as well. This is reminiscent of Dupont’s observation at Catholic schools that such allergic reactions involve an unresolved past (Dupont 2010, 251). On the other hand, the attitude of these pupils is characterised by appreciation: they consider the Catholic ritual and sacramental repertoire and the value orientation to be of potential importance for their personal and social life. Their positive evaluation of Catholic rituals and values strengthens the assumption that their views and attitudes are affected by Catholic roots. These aspects enable them to experience themselves as a self-evident part of an inclusive, meaningful collective. This is actually reminiscent of the social and religious conventionalism, which is considered one of the most characteristic aspects of the Catholicism which used to play a dominant role in their regions (Hellemans 2003; Elshof 2012, 2015).

The next paragraphs explore how former and current Catholicity affects two major concerns of RE: religious reflectivity and interreligious openness.

Catholicism and religious reflectivity

The sometimes hidden connectedness to their own Catholic roots among the unaffiliated pupils expresses a lack of reflectivity; it reveals an emotional connection which is not reflected upon and of which the pupils are not consciously aware. The continuing relationship with their own religion which is perceived within the answers of the religiously unaffiliated Dutch pupils is recognised in other investigations as well. Schweitzer (2007, 91–92), for instance, mentions several German investigations that observe a vigorous refusal of pupils to join another religious denomination. Despite their lack of religious participation and their disagreement with their denominational creed, they prefer to remain what they are. In this respect, the distinction made by pupils between religiousness and belonging to a religious group is relevant because it manifests the existence of unreligious Catholicity. Their distinction matches the observation of Van Dijk-Groeneboer and Maas (2010, 108) that mainly Catholic pupils mention such a division; only 13% of all pupils who consider themselves Catholic actually consider themselves religious. Casson (2011, 213–214), who also mentions this unreligious kind of Catholicism in
her investigation of Catholic pupils’ perception of their religious identity, relates this unreligious Catholicity to the pupils’ orientation towards a collective identity construction: being Catholic means partaking in a specific family or group. This orientation to participate in a familial or cultural ‘we’ was recognised earlier by Vergouwen (2001), Elshof (2012) and Schweitzer (2007, 92), when he mentions ‘so-called conventional or group-orientated attitudes’ within the individualised religiosity of youth.

This continuing connection to Catholicity is explained by Elshof (2012). According to her, individualisation in a secularised and functionalised culture causes an increased longing for community. The opportunity and the duty to construct one’s personal life generates mainly fluid and temporal relations, resulting in a longing for an inspired and sheltering community. This causes a transformed significance of traditional religion. Catholicism still provides an answer to the increased desire for shelter, also to non-religious people. Sometimes in a religious–cultural sharing of common values and communal orientation, and sometimes in the religious ritual framework that helps people to deal with the highs and lows in life (Elshof 2014, 2015). From this perspective, the pupils’ attachment to Catholic rituals and shared values is understandable because these aspects enable them to experience their lives as part of a meaning-giving familial or cultural collective. It answers their longing to partake in a ‘we’.

As mentioned above, the unaffiliated pupils’ responses indicate the social and religious conventionalism of the pre-conciliar Catholicism. The continuing influence of this former Catholicity is understandable against the background of the increased role played by family patterns of religious transmission as well. The decrease of church involvement and the changed role of Catholic schools did not only add to an isolation of the familial religious socialisation but to an increased relevance of family influence as well (Vergouwen 2001; Elshof 2012). Due to secularisation, children are mainly put in touch with religion by noticing their parental and grandparental perceptions and attitudes. Because unaffiliated families gain no new experiences with Catholicism, children mainly perceive the negative and frozen images of a former Catholicism their ancestors have left behind (Elshof 2012). Their acquaintance with other notorious aspects (such as child abuse) later on confirm the already existing negative views.

The unaffiliated pupils’ responses manifest that their individual views and attitudes towards Catholicism do not originate from personal reflections about or experiences with contemporary Catholic faith. They are determined by a pre-conciliar Catholicism, not in the least by the adoption of a significant conventional distinctive, namely the lack of personal religious reflectivity which characterises their answers. Their awareness of Catholicism is characterised by both fragmentation and collective amnesia (Casson 2011, 208) regarding the positive and constructive contributions of religion towards the development of society.

Not only the assumption about the views and attitudes of unaffiliated pupils calls for a review, the notion of the religiosity of religiously affiliated pupils does as well. The assumption of Sterkens and Vermeer that religious youngsters are conventional and less able to make personal reflected choices gets tackled. The answers show that religious pupils in particular demonstrate religious reflectivity. They state that they believe in a way they personally opted for and emphasise that their personal faith does not automatically coincide with the ecclesiastical one. They choose their own ways to express their beliefs. They choose their own pattern of attending religious services, praying, reading, learning or other practices. They stress their personal freedom of involvement in the Catholic faith in individually chosen ways, thereby manifesting that not all religious denominations require conformity and that denominations which do expect conformism are not automatically obeyed (McDonough 2015; Casson 2011).

The responses to the questionnaires articulating the willingness of affiliated youth to express their religiosity in daily life match the assumptions of Sterkens and Vermeer about the significance of the affiliated religiosity, which distinguishes this kind of religiosity from the unaffiliated type. However, research mentioning the relation between religiosity and volunteering (Webber 2012) or value orientation (Sjöborg 2013) does not confirm the assumption of religious fanaticism. These researchers mainly point at an openness towards the perspective and the needs of others and
social themes. Sjöborg (2013, 42) demonstrates that religious pupils are comparable to unreligious pupils in matters of friendship and relationships, but are also concerned with political, existential and ethical themes, and even encourages the assumption that religiosity broadens the habitual ‘happy midi-narrative’ (Savage et al. 2006) consisting of a world (view) mainly inhabited by friends and family.

Concerning Sterkens and Vermeer’s assumption derived from Bruce’s theory of the authority of the church, the affiliated responses match the results of several investigations (Kregting 2005; 16; De Groot 2006; 165–167; Van Dijk-Groeneboer and Maas 2010; Kregting and Harperink 2005; 13–15; Elshof 2012; McDonough 2015) showing that overall, the involvement of religious youth with Catholicity is not directed to hierarchical claims. Similar to unaffiliated religious pupils, affiliated pupils give priority to the dimensions of experience (experiencing their lives as related to a mysterious God) and community (sharing religiosity and international religious events). Because their search for religious knowledge is closely interwoven with religious experience, they reject an automatically obedient attitude towards religious authorities in matters of religious truth.

The research result of the sometimes hidden but ongoing bond between unaffiliated pupils and the conventional Catholicism of earlier decades in the previous section is supported by insights from other studies in this section. Moreover, this paragraph has clarified that affiliated pupils in particular show a personal and reflective attitude towards religion, and therewith undermines the hypothesis of Vermeer and Sterkens.

Catholicism and interreligious openness

The views and attitudes of unaffiliated pupils are characterised by disinterest in other religions as well. Despite Sterkens’ and Vermeer’s assumed interreligious openness among religious illiterates, the responses to the questionnaires do not express such an interest. Within the minority that does mention such a concern, both knowledge about other religions (except knowledge of the term reincarnation) and regular religious practices which deepen or broaden their interreligious enthusiasm are lacking. Actually, their pronounced openness towards religious diversity seems to be an argument which allows them to place Catholicism into perspective: by emphasising their interreligious openness they downplay the meaning of Catholicism. Mentioning interreligious openness primarily intends to distance oneself from Catholicism, which actually emphasises that Catholicism has remained the reference point.

This lack of interreligious openness matches Schweitzer’s observation of young German pupils who have ‘thin’ religious identities, which might be risky: that is, the religious openness towards different Christian denominations is not extended towards Islam. Schweitzer (2007) even discerns a distancing with emotional overtones. This lack of openness is recognised by Elshof (2012) as well. She considers this to be a characteristic of unaffiliated cultural Catholicism that expresses and prolongs its conventional Catholic roots: it answers to the challenges that come with an individual, secularised and pluralistic society in two particular ways. First by suggesting that a conveniently arranged society where people feel acknowledged and at home is achievable and second by emphasising the self-evidence of the solutions. From this perspective, the interreligious disinterest of unaffiliated Catholicism is a derivative of pre-conciliar conventional Catholicism, expressing a similar difficulty in dealing with religious otherness and exceptions. It might not be coincidental that the southern regions of the Netherlands form the homeland of the Dutch populist political party, which stresses the reinforcement of shared western religious values by rejecting other religious influences; it expresses a comparable conventional attitude. The fact that this cultural type of Catholicism has dismissed religious, hierarchical and institutional aspects and claims even seems to contribute to the incompetence of dealing with religious diversity (Elshof 2012).

Remarkably, all the responses mentioning an interest or openness towards other religions come from religiously affiliated pupils. Instead of a positive relation between non-affiliation and interreligious openness, the responses to the questionnaires report an opposite relation. This was
recognised earlier by De Hart, who considers such an openness to be the effect of an existent religious enthusiasm that gets extended to other religions (De Hart 1990, 110–111) and by Schweitzer, who mentions intrinsically religious motives for a similar openness (Schweitzer 2013, 253). Because conciliar and post-conciliar Catholicism is characterised by an attitude of openness towards other religions, the interreligious interest of affiliated pupils can be explained by their familiarity with the church's call. Concerning interreligious openness among unaffiliated pupils, not only an unawareness of the church's call for interreligious openness might play a role, an inclination to reject any clerical claim might play a role as well (Elshof 2012). Unaffiliated youngsters tend to have a specific attitude towards the religion they make use of; an attitude of religious tourism, which is characterised by a consumptive picking and choosing and which can be distinguished from religious pilgrimage; a more dialogical attitude towards religious traditions (Roebben 2013, 113–122). While the tourist is not interested in the meaning of the religious phenomenon from the perspective of the religion, the pilgrim is more open to the religion's point of view. Thus, the interreligious openness articulated by affiliated pupils does not only express their interest in other religions but illustrates their dialogical attitude towards contemporary Catholicism as well.

Overall, the hypothesis that religiously unaffiliated pupils can be regarded as blank sheets must be reviewed. The significance of Catholicism has not disappeared but changed. Against the background of a detraditionalised society which challenges individuals to construct their own identity, religiously unaffiliated pupils appeal to specific aspects of Catholicism in order to experience being part of a familial or social community that adds meaning to their lives. This cultural type of Catholicism tends to neglect institutional and hierarchical claims concerning the religious significance of the chosen Catholic aspects. This emancipation from hierarchy is attended by a conventional orientation which prolongs the self-evident pre-conciliar Catholicism, characterised by frozen images that impede the development of pupils' personal religious views and attitudes as well as their interest in interreligious diversity. Contrary to the assumptions, not religious non-affiliation but religious involvement with contemporary Catholicism encourages the development of a reflective personal perception of religion and openness towards religious diversity.

The next paragraph describes the classroom encounters between the pupils and theology students and debates Sterkens' and Vermeer’s preference for a cognitive turn.

The classroom encounters

The classroom meetings between theology students and pupils form the second component of Elshof’s research into the development of religiosity of young people, which intended to explore the possible transformation of youngsters’ religious views and attitudes through an encounter with affiliated Catholics.

The different channels of information (observation, reporting, exchange) show that the starting point of these encounters is the personal religious disinterest of the majority of pupils – an observation that corresponds to the theoretical assumption. However, the various information channels also showed a growing interest in the meetings amongst the pupils as they progressed. Uneasy giggling turned into calmness, vagueness became focus and indifferent silence changed into an animated debate about themes such as the Catholic faith, human freedom, good and evil, the meaning of life and interreligious dialogue. The students’ personal narratives about the meaning of faith in their lives aroused the pupils’ interest to reflect on these religious themes from the perspective of their own daily lives. This learning by encountering appeared to be evocative: it encouraged the development of a reflective identity by awakening the personal involvement. The pupils’ disinterest in religiosity (expressed in the first part of the investigation) transformed into a communicative exchange of vulnerable thoughts and experiences (Roebben 2012). It stimulated the dormant personal involvement.

Besides stimulating, this learning by encounter was confronting as well. The pupils realised that their views on Catholicism and religion in general did not correspond with the authentic personal examples and stories of these young Catholics; their frozen images became liquid (Roebben 2013,
Actually, they were confronted with several unfamiliar aspects of their own religion which challenged them to not only alter their views but to redefine themselves as well (Roebben 2013, 163). The third part of the investigation (the questionnaire asking for the pupils’ evaluation of the meetings) supported this observation: 60% of the pupils considered the input of the students (very) interesting and 33% of the pupils regarded the classroom discussions (very) significant. The evaluation questionnaires also clarified that the acquaintance with the insides of religiosity (the personal narratives and experiences) contributed to a (much) better understanding of religiosity (18% of the pupils) and affected the personal attitude towards Catholic religion (24% of the pupils). Several pupils explicitly mentioned that the encounter contributed to their openness towards other religions and to their world views. Therefore, it can be assumed that the encounters contribute to the development of ‘thick’ religious identities as a foundation for interreligious openness and dialogue, as advocated by Schweitzer (2007, 97–99).

In this respect, Mendls’ view about experiencing religious otherness as a didactical way to learn about and from religions might be nuanced. In his methodology, the experience of the otherness of pupils’ own religion forms the third step, after perceiving the unfamiliarity of other religions and experiencing aspects of other religions (Mendl 2009, 32–38). The encounters mentioned above demonstrate that the pupils experiencing the unfamiliarity of their own religion might be an appropriate or even preferable starting point. This prioritisation takes into account Dupont’s statement on Catholic education being challenged to develop a new relationship with Catholic religion in order to improve educational quality. A better understanding of their present and future identity depends on a willingness to deal with the past (Dupont 2010, 251).

In RE, which aims at pupils’ ability to deal with religious diversity, these encounters do not support a merely cognitive preference. Combined with the questionnaires, they manifest a lack of knowledge about the constructive and destructive ways in which religions in general and Catholicism in particular have affected social and religious lives. This calls for RE in which cognitive, affective and experiential elements are closely intertwined and contribute to learning processes of personal religious reflectivity and interreligious openness in combination. The encounters point to the didactical preference of experiential and attitudinal aspects; this prioritisation takes the hidden ongoing influence of former Catholicism seriously as a starting point for religiously unaffiliated pupils. This prioritisation also takes the possible willingness to open up to religion underneath the pupils’ religious indifference into account. It is plausible that religious educational changes add to the pupils’ enthusiasm and personal reflectivity concerning religious matters and increase their competences to deal with interreligious diversity within school and society. It is also credible that such an approach contributes to the future of RE as an imperative school subject.

**Conclusions and perspectives**

This article aims to contribute to the debate on the most appropriate approach within RE, by addressing research among students of Catholic secondary schools in the Netherlands and by discussing the most important results against two hypotheses that underlie the plea for a predominantly cognitive approach.

The most important research result is the hidden and continuous connection of unaffiliated pupils to the Catholic religion, which was the historically dominant religion in their region. This bond is established by familial inheritance that has become non-ecclesiastical and includes some important characteristics of the pre-Catholicism grandparents and parents were still familiar with. That Catholicism has been preserved in the mindset of pupils in solidified form: mainly conventionalism, the normativity of the self-evident and the safety of being embedded in a larger whole. However, this solidified Catholicism does not only contribute to the unaffiliated pupils’ lacking reflective treatment of the Catholic religion, but also to a lack of interest in other religions. The second important research finding is that religious pupils are more open to and capable of personal religious reflection and interreligious openness. The third important research result
concerns the meaning of learning by encounter. The meeting with religious peers contributes to the awareness of one’s own solidified images and to interest and openness: not only to the Catholic religion but also to other religions. The fact that solidified images therewith become fluid is also important for RE, which is mainly cognitively oriented: the more or less common religious disinterest among unaffiliated pupils is also connected with their emotional prejudices.

Because most pupils in western countries are religiously unaffiliated while their culture, like the Dutch one, is influenced by traditional religion, these results concern the religious educational field in the broad sense. The relevance comprises both a pedagogical and a didactical aspect.

It requires a pedagogical approach that takes account of religious heritages unaffiliated pupils might carry along, because these heritages do not only hinder the pedagogical aim of developing their religious identity, but also obstruct their willingness to participate in and contribute to a religiously diverse world. This pedagogical awareness of an ongoing traditional Catholicism should be accompanied by the consciousness that contemporary Catholicism offers an alternative perspective. The attitude of Pope Francis for example, and especially his openness towards interreligious dialogue and a shared intercultural commitment to social problems, is interesting. It is promising that this attitude also impregnates church documents concerning catholic schools. A recent declaration (2013) of the Congregation of Catholic Education for instance, bearing the appealing title: ‘Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love’, offers an alternative approach to religious diversity. This approach does not only put the traditional attitudes expressed by pupils into perspective, but is also capable of inspiring religious educational aims such as personal reflectivity, social responsibility and interreligious openness.

Concerning these aims, the results of this research also call for didactical attention. The experience of meeting the lived religiosity of other (young) people encouraged the pupils’ religious interest, reflectivity and interreligious openness. In this learning process, the experiential level seems to be fundamental; the basis from which attitudinal and cognitive transformations were developed. The research in fact indicates the pivotal meaning of this experiential level. This requires more a didactical focus on pupils’ experience with religion. This may comprise meetings with the lived religiosity of other people (Elshof 2017a, 2017b), but also the arrangement of learning situations that enable pupils to gain personal experience with religious practices, narratives, rituals or buildings (Roebben 2013). The crucial meaning of pupils’ experience in religious learning processes also calls for further research on the ways experiential, attitudinal and cognitive elements are interwoven.

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Notes on contributor

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