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To cite this article: Didier Pollefeyt & Michael Richards (2020) The living art of religious education: a paradigm of hermeneutics and dialogue for RE at faith schools today, British Journal of Religious Education, 42:3, 313-324, DOI: [10.1080/01416200.2019.1593106](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2019.1593106)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2019.1593106>



Published online: 24 Mar 2019.



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The living art of religious education: a paradigm of hermeneutics and dialogue for RE at faith schools today

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ABSTRACT

In light of ongoing debates about religious education as hermeneutical, this contribution proposes a ‘hermeneutical-communicative’ (HCM) paradigm for RE through the development of a twofold reflection: (a) a critical (re-) evaluation of the theological and anthropological foundations for RE in light of (b) a context marked by religious and philosophical diversity, disaffiliation and ‘areligiosity’. In this way, the HCM approach proposes an identity for RE that lies at the intersection of ‘hermeneutical’ and ‘dialogical’. Drawing upon theologies of interreligious dialogue, this contribution first analyses four paradigms for RE (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, particularism) and then advocates for a hermeneutical-communicative approach characterised by an emphasis on interreligious ‘literacy’, philosophical and religious hospitality and inter-hermeneutical dialogue. Such a paradigm results in a number of implications for practice, including sensitivity to ‘big questions’ in life, engagement with the Gospels and the faith tradition, respect and appreciation for other avenues in the search for meaning and identity, and attention to the personal growth of young people.

KEYWORDS

Religious education (RE);
faith schools; hermeneutics;
dialogue

A prominent role for hermeneutics in RE has been debated for decades (Lombaerts and Pollefeyt 2004; Wright 1996; Jackson 1997) and is far from being realised. Readers of this journal in particular will be familiar with several important lines of discussion in a recent special edition (2018, n.3), ranging from concerns of biblical hermeneutics (see Bowie and Coles; Carswell) to the philosophical foundations of RE as hermeneutical (see Aldridge). Furthermore, for faith schools in Western contexts such as Europe, Australia and the United States, the ‘hermeneutical question’ for RE also takes on added importance today as schools in contexts such as these increasingly operate amid religious and philosophical diversity throughout both the wider society and within the school itself (Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2014).

In an effort to advance these ‘hermeneutical’ lines of discussion for RE, this contribution advocates for a twofold reflection: (a) a critical (re-)evaluation of the theological and anthropological foundations for RE in light of (b) a context marked by religious and philosophical diversity, disaffiliation and ‘areligiosity’. In this way, we aim to address the question of a ‘paradigm’ for RE in faith schools by drawing upon theologies of interreligious dialogue to chart a ‘paradigm’ that lies at the intersection of ‘hermeneutical’ and ‘dialogical’.

To that end, this contribution unfolds in three parts. First, we introduce a metaphor to frame our lines of argumentation – a metaphor to which we return in the end. Second, we offer an analysis and critical theological evaluation of four predominant paradigms at work in RE. Along the way, associations are drawn with various educational/pedagogical strategies and materials that demonstrate these paradigms operationally. Third, we then present and advocate for a *hermeneutical-*

communicative (HCM) paradigm – a ‘fifth’ approach, which will be argued offers the strongest foundations for (faith school) RE today and beyond. Here we develop the main theological and anthropological roots of this HCM paradigm and discuss several priority implications of this approach for the design and practice of RE.

This contribution comes from a position of scholarship and practice in Belgium, informed by empirical research on these questions with Catholic schools in Europe, Australia and the United States, and is shared in a spirit of common concern with scholars in the readership of this journal.

The museum collection and the audio guide

We start with an image meant to frame our reflections on the ‘hermeneutical-dialogical’ intersection in response to recent tendencies towards ‘objectification’ in (faith school) RE: namely, those ‘standards-based’ policy initiatives (for example, REC 2018 in England and Wales) that advocate for an ‘objective’ material study of the religious traditions (or aspects of them in the case of the *levensbeschouwing, ethiek en filosofie* (LEF) model in Belgium), measurable primarily through cognitive knowledge-outcomes and taught by teachers with confessionally aligned but hermeneutically ‘neutral’ perspectives – an approach that we liken to touring a ‘pre-determined’ and ‘pre-interpreted’ set of museum exhibits with an audio guide or a guidebook. Not only does one’s fascination wane in the face of a pale promise of ‘encountering art’, but the headphones and guidebook soon fall into disuse as the same descriptions are offered time and again, framed by endless arrays of historical data, comparisons between periods of art, and narrow (pre-drawn) conclusions about the ‘message’ of the artists.

This kind of ‘objective’ and (so-called) ‘neutral’ approach to RE can result in several contexts: for example (a) in state schools where confessionality in RE is deemed *too dominant* in the midst of a religiously and philosophically plural population and the ‘solution’ is to eliminate that dominance by reducing a given confession (Catholicism for example) to just one ‘museum wing’ among many (‘multireligious learning’, see Ziebertz 2007); and (b) in private (state independent) faith schools where confessionality is deemed *too weak* – for example, when confronted by trends of detraditionalisation and disaffiliation – and the ‘solution’ is to (re)align RE with ‘catechesis for all’ (‘monoreligious learning’). In contexts like these, the challenge today is to move religious education beyond a kind of ‘objective’ museum tour of a religious tradition with its catalogue-like descriptions of its various exhibits, and towards a more contextually engaged and personally meaningful immersion into living exhibits in which ‘art’ comes alive in the here and now and communicates with people about life and identity today – an appeal very much in line with Bowie’s (2018) call for ‘studying wisdom’ rather than ‘studying a religious tradition’.

Thus we present the image of RE as ‘living art’. In this way, the ‘tour’ becomes a kind of interactive encounter (both subject-object and subject-subject) with living exhibits found in both the halls of the museum and the world at large, encounters through which students come to ‘taste’ art as a result of the expressed passions of their teachers and others.

Furthermore, our image of RE as ‘living art’ does not limit this tour to only the ‘Christian wing’. Indeed even in RE at a faith school, there are certain works of art (wisdom) that must be encountered by everyone in the group. However, the ‘route’ is not entirely fixed in advance. It will likely detour at times into other lesser-known and even lesser-valued rooms in both the Christian wing and elsewhere. The complete path of the route will in the end be determined as a function both of the particular composition of the group and of current events in the wider social context.

Catholic RE according to four paradigms

With this image and this appeal in mind, the second part of this contribution investigates the ‘hermeneutical-dialogical’ intersection from a theological perspective, by way of four existing ‘paradigms’ drawn from theologies of interreligious dialogue (see Race 1983). Each of these paradigms, along with its associated educational strategies, remains operative, to varying degrees,

in contemporary RE, but, as will be argued, none allows adequately for the flourishing of a space of hermeneutics *and* dialogue in RE.

Exclusivism: old and new forms

In its basic form, 'exclusivism' as a theological paradigm posits that truth is binary: every 'hermeneutical' endeavour can only result in a 'right' interpretation or a 'wrong' one. The other who does not accept 'my' interpretation is in error, and the others who stand outside of 'our' truth are beyond salvation and in extreme cases are even unworthy of respect. In this paradigm, competing interpretations of a reality cannot coexist. Dissent equates to untruth (a 'falsity') and results in intolerance, as any multiplicity of truths cannot be anything other than mutually exclusive.

Throughout history, such a binary regard for truth has occurred in many religious circles, and still continues to some extent today. In Christianity, for example, the former adage *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ('no salvation outside the church') has led to disastrous applications, especially with regard to our brothers and sisters in the Jewish faith. In Judaism, certain concepts of election have been presented as exclusivistic (see Brill 2010). In Islam, we see a contemporary rise in 'replacement theology' (Islam supersedes other religions) (see Keating 2014). Furthermore, in the field of ethics one can also find such a binary approach in the practical dichotomy between the ('outdated') body of Christian thought and (the 'new light' of) liberalism.

Exclusivism is not only a theological paradigm but a secular one as well. Newer forms are evident in the growing importance of what we might call scientism, scientific atheism, or fundamentalist atheism – positions that reject outright any 'religious' interpretation. In encounters such as these, when one enters a debate from an admittedly religious point of view, he or she immediately loses any right, as it were, to be heard or even treated with respect. For example, a common (but mild) example of such exclusivism here in Belgium is the constant use in social media and media at large of the word 'still': 'do you *still* believe?', 'do you *still* go to church?', 'do they *still* teach Christian religion at school?' The embedded presupposition is that the logical and final end point of society's evolution is the self-nullification of religion and the reign of 'secularity' as the only valid ideology. More explicit forms of such exclusivism can also be seen in discussions on the elimination of every reference to religion in the Belgian constitution.

One other contemporary form of exclusivism – and one that at first mention might sound paradoxical – is in a way (theological) pluralism itself. As presented today, pluralism risks becoming intolerant of anyone who is not willing to submit to the relativistic ideology that lies behind it. In this sense, pluralism has become a sort of new ideology in itself: a new religion, if you will, that tolerates no alternative. Such pluralism-framed encounters between religious 'others' are less and less a meeting of different religious interpretations, and more and more a meeting between people who adhere to the same 'religion' of pluralism. In this way, students and teachers in RE who attempt to speak strongly from *within their own tradition* actually place themselves outside this kind of 'dialogue'.

Certainly, exclusivism is a faulty paradigm for faith school RE in a multireligious and multilingual context (or any context for that matter), as it precludes not only the hospitality necessary for learning *with and from* others (Ziebertz 2007), but also the hermeneutical agency of the subject (see also 'agency' vis-à-vis 'living tradition' in Sullivan 2018). The only merit for exclusivism is for it to be applied to itself (the exclusion of exclusivism), as 'the intolerance of the other is the limit to my own tolerance' (Ricoeur 1988, 437). In practical terms, when the hermeneutical capacity among students becomes closed off through the entry of binary thinking (for example, 'us' verses 'them'), then teachers can and must intervene to reopen that space.

Inclusivism, alterity and monocorrelation: ingredients for unintended disinterest in religion

A second theological paradigm sometimes at work in RE is 'inclusivism'. In Catholic circles, this has been the official position of the church since the time of Vatican II (see *Lumen Gentium* (1964) no. 16; *Nostra Aetate* (1965) no. 2) and identifies the possibility of truth beyond one's own (Catholic) perspective; however, the awareness of such truth is only possible through the action of Christ, even while standing in that truth does not require that one consciously knows Christ (Rahner 1964, 1986; Hick 1993).

To a certain extent, this kind of Christocentric perspective is inevitable when one calls oneself a Christian; that is, a Christian is really only able to look at reality in a Christological way. To be (authentically) Christian is not simply to put on a pair of glasses that can be taken off at will. Rather, for the one who dares to call oneself a follower of Christ, it is that Christ who becomes burned into the depths of one's identity; otherwise such an identity loses its most authentic meaning.

At the same time, the danger of Christian inclusivism is that one does not come to acknowledge the true 'otherness' of the other, but rather sees alterity only as something superficial – nothing more substantial than a mask of difference, if you will, behind which Christ reveals Christself in the other. In an inclusivistic framework such as this, the other is not excluded – as would be the case in exclusivism – but the risk remains that the other is either reduced or absorbed into that which fits the other into one's own frame of truth (akin to the concerns raised in Congregation for Catholic Education 22, 24). Put differently, 'inclusivism' treats the 'other' not so much as an agent of his or her own search for truth, but only insofar as he or she serves to advance mine (Christian truth).

The core problem for inclusivism as a theological paradigm is therefore the radical 'otherness' of the (religious) 'other': one who enters a shared hermeneutical space as *radically* other and who cannot nor should not be simply be expected to adapt to a 'common' framework of truth (Moyaert 2010, 2014). Put simply, a Muslim is no more an anonymous Christian than a Christian is an anonymous Muslim; nor is a Lutheran any more an anonymous Catholic than vice versa.

In terms of faith school identity and RE, inclusivism is typically associated with an educational paradigm we have come to call *monocorrelation* (Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2014): the linking of 'common' experiences with (particular interpretations of 'selections' from) the Bible and church doctrine. These 'correlations' are typically drawn in a (predictable) unidirectional movement from so-called 'universal' experiences (that is, presumed commonality without regard for diversity or difference) to the Bible and body of church teachings. Concerning biblical hermeneutics in particular, this kind of practice (of which 'proof-texting' is one aspect) has been and continues to be observed with great frustration in RE (Pollefeyt and Bieringer 2005) and is usually done with the otherwise 'good intention' of guiding students to appropriate the *humanistic* dimensions of Bible stories (an experience of love, a feeling of compassion, an act of charity) in the 'hidden' (and therefore undirected) hope that they will then appropriate the *divine* aspects thereof. It is as though a (Catholic) RE teacher says (even in a multireligious context), 'see, we all experience forgiveness from our parents, therefore we can all understand the forgiveness of God, therefore the sacrament of reconciliation is for all of us'.

Although the intention behind 'monocorrelation' is typically one of bringing students *towards* a new (external) or greater (internal) appreciation for the religious tradition, students do not typically experience it this way. Rather as research suggests (Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2014), one significant effect of such 'monocorrelation' in RE is that these (mechanical) movements become predictable, presumptive of experience as universal, and result in students feeling coerced or even manipulated into (re)identifying themselves as Christian in some way. In more extreme cases, students may even perceive that such RE indoctrinates. At the same time, this pedagogical approach also results in an erosion of the faith tradition and a reduction of Christian revelation to 'messages' that harmonise all too easily with human experience, resulting not only in student disinterest in religion but also a decline in the Christian distinctiveness of the school's identity.

In our own university classrooms, we have observed the results of (previous) years of this 'monocorrelation' approach in the 'religious education fatigue' with which students come today:

that ‘complex combination of disinterest, passivity, inertia, latency, boredom, indifference and sometimes resistance’ (Pollefeyt 2018, 327) that arises among students in regards to most topics – not only ‘bible fatigue’, but also doctrine fatigue, ethics fatigue and others. Although such ‘fatigue’ may appear moderate, it should not be underestimated as the consequence of overexposure to an ineffective approach in RE.

To be clear, a theology of Christian inclusivism per se is not a cause of disinterest in religion among young people (and adults); rather it is this ‘monocorrelation’ as an educational paradigm that is highly problematic for faith school RE. Put inversely, the drawing of correlations between (diverse) experiences and (a richly diverse) religious tradition is actually *desirable* and *inevitable* in a form of RE that brings forth Christian perspectives and Christian faith witnesses amid a wide context of religious and philosophical viewpoints (the ‘healthy plural education’ of Ford 2018). In fact, such an ‘interhermeneutical’ approach, if you will, is at the core of an educational paradigm we call ‘multicorrelation’: the clear resounding of faith-filled (confessional) hermeneutical perspectives amid serious engagement with the wider diverse reality of the world. Later sections of this article return to address this paradigm.

Pluralism as a ‘new’ ideology

A third theological paradigm at work in RE is that of pluralism, which posits that all religions reflect various *human interpretations* of the same so-called ‘ultimate reality’ (Hick and Knitter 1987; Knitter 1996), even if that ultimate reality is unknown or altogether nonexistent. In this way, while all interpretations may not be equally true (one may interpret this ultimate reality more fully than another), they are all *equally untrue*. Thus the question of truth is often suspended in pluralism because nothing can be said with certainty about the destiny of humanity and the world.

In RE at large, pluralism is typically associated with a comparative approach to the study of religion. Students are asked to develop a table of comparisons with objective descriptions of the material characteristics of various ‘world’ religious traditions and philosophies, of which (generic) Catholicism or Christianity (even more generically) is merely one among many, for example. Readers will certainly be familiar this approach as the hallmark of politically-governed developments in RE, such as (REC 2018) *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* in England and Wales. Teachers in this kind of RE often ignore issues of ‘internal plurality’ (see Horrell and Davis 2014) and usually adopt (by expectation or choice) a kind of ‘observer’ status in order not to offend the ‘academic’ nature of such study.

The criticism of this theological paradigm is clear (D’Costa 2000; Lindbeck 1997; Griffiths 1997). Very often a religious tradition or philosophy is so reduced to comparative-descriptive statements that it is no longer recognisable in these descriptions or it has even become perverted in some way – resulting in the kind of ‘narrow and [...] unrepresentative characterisation of Christianity’ described by Bowie and Coles (2018, 285). In fact, this comparative approach in itself introduces or can be used to introduce a (superseding) relativistic-atheistic worldview in which religions and philosophical systems compete in a kind of marketplace of personal choice: that is, in the service of one’s personal identity, one may opt in favour of one tradition in particular, no tradition at all, or even a kind of mix-and-match approach to elements from multiple traditions and philosophies as they best suit one’s own personal interests. When presented in this way, the expectation is that everyone should ultimately subscribe to such a ‘pluralistic’ worldview.

Concerning faith school identity and RE, it should go without saying that a pluralistic paradigm such as this not only undermines the rich (diverse) identity of the school’s faith tradition – or any religious tradition for that matter – but also the identity of the believers that speak and act from within that tradition.

Particularism and the impossibility of knowing the other

A fourth and more recent theological paradigm is that of so-called particularism. Whereas in inclusivism and pluralism one interprets truth according to a common foundation or a common bond across religious identities (for example, ‘ultimate reality’ in pluralism, Christology in Christian

inclusivism), in particularism each religion exists as its own unique reality, understandable *only from within* (Lindbeck 1997). In this way, particularism is thus a reversal of pluralism: while the latter suggests that different religions are different ways of interpreting (one) reality, the former proposes that it is *reality itself* that is *plural*; that is, the multiplicity of religious traditions reveals a multiplicity of realities.

From this perspective, an external interpretation of a reality (an experience, a religious tradition) is not possible. If one wants to understand something about (a particular) religion, for example, one must immerse oneself in the worldview and culture of that tradition: not only an immersion into its scriptures, doctrines, practices and philosophy of life, but also among a group of belief-affirming 'insiders' (akin to the 'immersion-learning' approach of 'shared Christian praxis', Groome 1991). In this way, RE is thought to happen only internally within the context of a given religious tradition.

Pedagogically speaking, this approach frames RE as a sort of (neo-)catechesis in which the Catholic faith tradition is presented in its fullness and on its own terms and all students (Catholic or otherwise) are invited to 'come and see' (evident for example in USCCB 2008). This approach holds true whether the 'faith-transmission' motivation behind this paradigm leans more towards an inductive-mystagogical approach (reflection on experience) or more towards a deductive-kerygmatic approach (preaching the doctrine).

In terms of RE in today's context, the risk of this particularist paradigm – and the neo-catechetical approach associate with it – is that faith schools, while multireligious and multi-philosophical in composition and context, become monoreligious and monoideological in practice. Confessional voices are the only ones given weight in the hermeneutical space and this predominance drowns out, intentionally or unintentionally, any space for 'other' voices addressing questions of truth, meaning and identity. Such a monologic environment therefore not only poses a kind of injustice to the religious and philosophical others involved in faith schools, but it also unjustly results in a grand missed opportunity for students who identify with the school's faith tradition to learn *with and from* others on the questions that lie in front of them all.

Religious education today: grammar, hospitality and dialogue

In relation to these above four paradigms, a fifth paradigm – and in fact the one for which we advocate – lies somewhere in the liminal space between and beyond pluralism and particularism. Here, we move into a space of interpretation, dialogue and identity in (faith school) RE and advocate for what we call a 'hermeneutical-communicative' (HCM) paradigm (originally, Lombaerts and Pollefeyt 2004).

The theological foundations of this paradigm are rooted in the so-called 'linguistic turn' in theology (Lindbeck 1997) and can perhaps be understood most directly if we redraw the parallel between 'religion' and 'language'. Put simply, the basic premise of this analogy affirms that a religion indeed speaks a certain 'language' and that, like a language, a religious 'system' establishes its own world of meaning through communication and hermeneutics (also raised in Wright 1997, Wright 2016).

Unlike particularism, in this paradigm there are also realities beyond the scope of such a (religious) linguistic system – realities to which that language refers even though the language itself can never fully encompass or explain such realities. Furthermore, any given linguistic 'family' is itself composed of many dialects and variants (internal plurality) and it interacts with all manner of other language systems (external plurality). In some cases, these various language families overlap with similarities in terminology and even structure.

In short, in order to learn about life, others and oneself in a religiously hued world, one must – in a sense – learn a specific language rooted in a specific culture, aware of the greater realities to which it refers and conscious of both its interactions with other linguistic systems as well as its own internal linguistic plurality. For example, *Catholic* RE emphasises the learning of precisely one such body of religious and spiritual literacy – a certain culture filled with certain symbols, stories, rites, rituals, garments, art and so forth – through which God speaks with humanity for Christians. However, in

the HCM paradigm, this ‘Catholic language’ is appreciated *in dialogue with* – not in isolation from – other religious and philosophical ‘language systems’ (see for example, the recently released (2019) RE secondary curriculum guide for Flanders: *Leerplan Rooms-Katholieke Godsdienst*).

At the same time, the objective of RE in a HCM paradigm is not just about the language itself as a system on a factual level; here we underscore that it is also about the opportunities that such (confessional) fluency opens up in one’s search for spirituality, meaning and identity (see CCE 2013, n.42). What do such stories, images, symbols and other aspects of this religious tradition say about the world and others, about myself, about the Transcendent? Catholic RE is not, for example, just about the crucifixion and resurrection but also about the Crucified and Resurrected. It is not just about the teachings of Jesus that inspire, motivate, and harmonise well with similar teachings in other religions and philosophies, but it is also about hearing and reflecting on those teachings that criticise and challenge one’s worldview. It is about both the historical Jesus and the Christ among us today. In this way, we advocated for an RE that is not just about learning the language as such but also about encountering the what and the who is found in and through those mediations.

Furthermore, the HCM paradigm insists that speakers of other languages can enter into a ‘foreign’ language system. For this reason we underscore the importance of ‘linguistic hospitality’ (Moyaert 2014; Ricoeur 2004) in the educational space. Young people must be received as they are and actively welcomed, in a manner of speaking, into this religious language. Concretely, this means recognising that for many students, a religious language may well be a ‘foreign’ one – it is neither their mother tongue nor even an already acquired second language. For others, religion may be a kind of ‘domestic only’ language that they can speak in a limited way and in familiar situations with people close to them.

The foreignness of this language means therefore that religious learning – especially in early stages – involves a kind of ‘translational’ movement between one language and another (Ricoeur 2004). Doing such translation work means that one assumes religions are open systems (not closed as in particularism) and that there is therefore the possibility to translate the Christian message, meditated in the language on which it is based, into new contexts. Thus the HCM paradigm presupposes accepting ‘translatability’ in religious traditions.

As with any translational movement, it must be accepted that no perfect translation exists. Every translation runs the risk of losing meaning or losing depth and complexity in the movement between languages (Ricoeur 2004). Of course translations of the Christian message must always remain faithful to their source and rooted in other preceding translations, but at the same time translations always have their own limitations. RE can only stand in this tension if it is accepted that (a) while perfect translations do not exist, the art of translation is itself highly valuable and (b) if, to that end, teachers are accompanied in their practice by theologians, pastors and other leaders in religious education (echoed in Rymarz 2018).

In the work of translation, sometimes it is also the case that new dimensions of the source language – the faith tradition – are discovered in the course of reflecting on its meanings. Thus translation is not just a matter of loss; translations can also offer new perspectives that perhaps previous generations have not understood or even seen in the religious tradition. This also helps explain why traditions are continually enriched through new charisms and new forms of spirituality.

One final point to observe in this HCM paradigm is the reciprocal importance of young Christians to learn to be guests in the language of other philosophies and religious traditions, akin to Pope Francis’ (2017) call to ‘put into practice the grammar of dialogue’. Learning some of the basic grammar and language of those others from the world in which young people live is imperative not only towards developing a deeper understanding and appreciation for one’s own identity but also towards developing an inter-linguistic (or inter-religious) hospitality as an avenue towards a more peaceful and just world – hence our argument in favour of hermeneutical-dialogical paradigm for (faith school) RE.

Indeed, therefore we agree with Bowie (2018 editorial) that there is ‘a hermeneutical realisation at the heart of RE waiting to be fully appreciated’, and, to that end, have contended above that the

foundations for this realisation lie in addressing the *theological and anthropological* foundations for RE in light of the contemporary context of religious and philosophical plurality in which (Catholic) RE operates today. The set of foundations proposed above (the HCM approach) emphasises simultaneously both a *hermeneutical and dialogical paradigm* for RE. In the sections that follow, we now reflect on three significant implications of this HCM paradigm for RE design and practice in faith schools.

Philosophical thoughtfulness and polyphonic identity

The first of these pedagogical implications is that of awakening in young people what we describe as a 'philosophical thoughtfulness' – a kind of interior hermeneutical space in which young people address their own sense of wonder and curiosity as well as their questioning and reflecting regarding spirituality, meaning and identity in their lives (Crawford and Rossiter 2006; Rossiter 2011). For many students today, addressing this thoughtfulness requires teachers to realise a kind of 'pedagogy of provocation' (echoing Sullivan 2018): breaking open, waking up, nurturing curiosity, creating receptivity, arousing wonder, questioning, speaking prophetically, uncovering indifference, unmasking presuppositions and prejudice. At the same time, the ongoing development of such 'thoughtfulness' also demands processes of philosophical reasoning (see Wright 2016) to address big questions in life: law and grace, autonomy and relationship, life and death, past and future.¹

In this regard, it is important to recognise that students enter spaces of religious education, not as empty vessels, but as individuals with identities already in development. They may not (yet or never) interpret the world in a religious frame (Roebben 2016), but they come as young people already forming all manner of perspectives, suppositions and even conclusions as their identities take shape within their own unique cultures, social contexts and relationships. Thus we say that the identity of young people is 'polyphonic' and that there is already activity within their hermeneutical capacity. No student – or teacher for that matter – is 'neutral' (unlike the position that pluralists might prefer). From a humanist perspective, each person is marked by limitation and fallibility; from a theological perspective such limitation is known as original sin.

Diversity also contributes to the shaping of this polyphonic identity – not just the diversity that one encounters in the world around, but also the diversity that one knows within one's own self. This is not only the case for students, but it also the case for teachers, and perhaps even more so among the younger teachers of today. In this way, the relationship between identity and diversity itself takes on a new starting point with each generation.

In addition to addressing this philosophical thoughtfulness and polyphonic identity, a second implication for (Catholic) RE is the (development of an) appreciation for philosophical difference. *Nostra Aetate* and Vatican II in general still offer much for theological reflection about other religions and philosophies. In the formal language of its time, *Nostra Aetate* (n.2) states that the Catholic Church 'regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all [people]'. This insight of Vatican II invites us to accept that rays of Truth in this world may be experienced by others in the 'language' of their own religious traditions. Of course, Vatican II frames these 'rays' in an inclusivistic way as the light of Christ in the end, but what should not be overlooked here is the awareness that Truth shines forth in traditions beyond our own. This is an important point that demands ongoing discussion in RE today, especially amid the religious and philosophical diversification of today's context.

In a dialogic and hermeneutical paradigm such as HCM, it is imperative of course that voices from the confessional faith tradition enter prominently. There is no direct revelation of God and there is no direct line between universal human experience and Christian faith. In order to recognise the Transcendent and to interpret and experience that Transcendent religiously, the hermeneutical space must not only be open (philosophical thoughtfulness) but it must also have

a religious language with which to communicate. HCM therefore has both inductive and deductive movements (see for example, the *Caleidoscoop* (Kaleidoscope) RE materials used in Flanders: <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/caleidoscoop>).

Vulnerability in mediations of the transcendent

Our advocacy here for a simultaneous '*intra-*' and '*inter-*religious literacy' in RE is beneficial both to the church and the society at large. At the same time, this approach is not just about literacy in the cultural sense of the word; it is also about the deeper wisdom-encountering opportunities that this literacy enables. The approach we advocate aims at entering into a personal and (diverse) communal dialogue with the Gospels and the Christian faith tradition about their relevance in (one's) life today (similar to Aldridge's (2018) 'pedagogical triangle', but with much greater attention to 'inter-hermeneutical' dialogue amid a context of plurality). Such opportunities (simultaneously *intra-* and *inter-*) are made possible as hermeneutical spaces are opened, broadened and deepened in many aspects of religious education: intellectual learning, religious experiences, spirituality, social engagement, caring for creation, sensitivity towards stories and rituals, sacramental experiences and so forth.

What also needs to be appreciated and valued once again is the place of so-called *negative* or *apophatic theology* (see Boeve 2006). Simply put, this is a theology of 'not knowing'. In fact we often do not arrive at knowing who God is, but very often we can say who God is not. In RE, the faith tradition is indeed a kind of language – a mediation structure, if you will – through which the Transcendent is encountered; yet at the same time, that language, that faith tradition, can also sometimes be an obstacle in one's attempts towards self-reflection and appropriation. This awareness of the imperfection of language calls us to recognise that there are also forms of not knowing and times at which narration is not possible. God is always greater than our own linguistic-religious system and the structures of our own faith tradition.

One penultimate reflection on this point of 'vulnerability' concerns the need to open up a space for young people to appreciate that there are other languages in the experience of the transcendent. These can of course be discovered in other classical monotheistic traditions but also in the 'immanent transcendence' that humanism speaks about (see Haynes 2012). For example, as one result of Jewish-Christian dialogue (Moyaert and Pollefeyt 2010), we have learned to accept that God has apparently chosen to reveal Godself to people in multiple ways; and not all of the ways are accessible for Christians. This means that Christians cannot fully understand Jewish mediations and language structures nor can they experience what it means to live in and interpret the world from within those Jewish structures. However, Christians can come to see the truth, goodness and beauty that also emanates through the Jewish tradition and to receive these rays hospitably. Such a linguistic (religious) freedom is of particular importance in contemporary (faith school) RE.

Towards the philosophical growth of young people and a peace-filled society

Finally, we turn our attention to the (personal) philosophical and spiritual growth of young people. Such attention in RE requires us to listen deeply to the experiences and needs of young people: their own questions about and quests for spirituality, meaning and identity. Where can Christian traditions open new hermeneutical spaces for them? How can the Gospels speak anew to them amid their life in the world today? Where do they see Christ and hear Christ's voice? In this way, we underscore here that RE demands a renewed attention to care and accompaniment as much as to the philosophical thoughtfulness described above. How is each young person, appreciative of his or her own unique identity, received into a preferentially confessional environment? How can they be invited to bring their own identities and searching into this space? How can faith schools support all students in their search for community and relationships of meaning? How can a confessional religious education serve each young person's own philosophical, spiritual and

human growth – even for those who are not Christian and those who do not or will no longer consider themselves part of the church?

When speaking of philosophical skills, some caution is also important. In an era of the professionalisation of teaching and learning and a renewed focus on ‘critical thinking skills’ (see Vermeer 2012) the notion of ‘learning as personal formation’ risks being reframed into a table of assessable ‘attitudes’ and ‘values’. Important as these are to the work of schooling (religious and otherwise), the ‘religion’ in ‘religious’ education cannot be reduced to just a ‘philosophy of life’ offered at the service of the young person seeking to ‘construct’ one’s own philosophical identity.

Defining RE outcomes in terms of broadly held social values (for example, empathy and forgiveness) and ‘mono-correlating’ these values all-too-easily with the person of Jesus and the teachings of the church only returns RE to the risk of disinterest in religion and a loss of Christian distinctiveness (a kind of ‘secularizing’ effect, if you will). While seeming to satisfy curricular goals, this practice only masks the larger trends towards disinterest and disaffiliation that lie behind it: as young people appropriate the value, they leave behind the (predetermined) correlations with Jesus and the faith tradition.

In the end, it must not be forgotten that the way in which questions of meaning and identity are asked is also itself a philosophical question. The question of ideology is always coloured in terms of life and it is dangerous to separate questions of meaning and identity from one’s own underlying ideology. This contribution therefore argues that Christian faith in a confessional tradition is not simply ‘a philosophy of life’ that one must ‘skilfully’ learn to compare and contrast with other philosophies; rather, it is also about a radically different life ‘in Christ’ that has the potential to transform those who encounter that Christ. This too underscores questions of *how* to open new hermeneutical perspectives in young people and *which* pedagogical strategies can best help us to connect philosophical thoughtfulness, theology and an inspired life with each other in a meaningful way.

Conclusion

Finally, in returning to our original image of RE as ‘living art’, this contribution has advocated for a ‘hermeneutical-communicative’ (HCM) paradigm for (faith school) RE in response to trends that would rather treat the content of RE as a type of (objective) catalogue of museum exhibits and the teacher as something akin to a kind of audio guide. Efforts to advance hermeneutics in RE at faith schools will hopefully appreciate that such RE is a space where young people can invest in their own searching and their own attempts to derive understanding and meaning from their encounters with the Gospel and the faith tradition. In this way, the multireligious and multiphilosophical context of today is not a threat to Christian faith but a new opportunity to encounter others and thereby more deeply understand oneself and one’s tradition in relation to the other. Human experience offers a multitude of interpretations and ‘living art’ requires such interpretation and personal response on the part of those who can see and hear it.

As one example of such invitation to hermeneutics and dialogue, we conclude this contribution with a brief hermeneutical meditation on Marc Chagall’s *The Israelites’ Crossing of the Red Sea* (<https://thejewishmuseum.org/collection/721-crossing-of-the-red-sea>). Speaking from within our own faith tradition, we see in this image young people in all their diversity who are guided prophetically, accompanied, drawn out of oppression and pointed in a new direction through the opening of new questions and new ways of seeing. During their movement, these young people come to encounter perspectives on truth, wisdom and identity from a specific religious tradition – symbolised in the painting by the small angel with scriptures in hand. These sacred scriptures (as seen in their position somewhat forward of the exodus) are not just stories about the past but are also an invitation to dream with God a future (note the horizon in red) fed by their questions and their searching and motivated by Moses their *prophète-accompagnateur*.

Note

1. In the context of a school environment where diversity of thought is taken seriously, the hermeneutical-communicative model (HCM) does in fact does imply that processes of philosophical reasoning are learned and brought to bear on 'big life questions'. There is therefore philosophical depth and rigor in HCM, which Rossiter may have overlooked in Rossiter (2013, 26).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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