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FROM INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING  
TO INTERWORLDVIEW EDUCATION

EDITED BY

DIDIER POLLEFEYT

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## INTRODUCTION

FROM INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING TO  
INTERWORLDVIEW EDUCATION

In 2007, we published in this series a volume on interreligious learning<sup>1</sup>. Fifteen years later, in 2022, we present this new book on interworldview education. The changing titles between both books also reflect changes in theology and religious pedagogy itself over the years. In this introduction, we present some significant shifts we have seen in the past fifteen years and how they are reflected in the structure and the different contributions of this book. The movement from ‘interreligious learning’ to ‘interworldview education’ reflects both an individualization and broadening of education in faith and worldviews. The most fundamental change we see in classrooms all over the Western world is that fewer and fewer pupils identify with one institutional faith tradition as a consequence of the growth of secularization and pluralization. If they do identify, then it is mostly in a partial way – revealing the increasing diversity in faith traditions inside and outside the school. It is increasingly more difficult to see religious education as a space at school where ‘religions’ encounter each other, as the term ‘interreligious’ seems to suggest. Of course, many pupils are still initiated in a certain religion. They show loyalties towards it, but we see polyphonic correlations between personal worldview experiences and the resources that religious traditions offer<sup>2</sup>. There is also a growing group of pupils that take an agnostic, atheist, or indifferent stance concerning topics in religious education. Therefore, ‘interreligious learning’ does in many cases no longer capture the reality of the classroom, not even in classes with a clear confessional frame of reference. Because of this new context, the term ‘worldview’ (Dutch: *levensbeschouwing*; French: *philosophie de vie*; German: *Weltanschauung*) is used more and more instead of ‘faith’ or ‘religion’. In her contribution in this book, Gerdien Bertram-Troost defines a ‘worldview’ as “an individual’s system of implicit and explicit views and feelings in relation to human life”. It is seen “as being continuously subject to change”. Or, to put it in a simple, stipulative definition: ‘A

1. D. POLLEFEYT, *Interreligious Learning* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 201), Leuven, Leuven University Press – Peeters, 2007.

2. D. POLLEFEYT – M. RICHARDS, *The Living Art of Religious Education: A Paradigm of Hermeneutics and Dialogue for RE in Faith Schools Today*, in *British Journal of Religious Education* 41 (2019) 313-324.

worldview is a way one looks at life'. All authors in this book agree that not only do all pupils have such a worldview (implicitly or explicitly), but it is also the obligation of the school system to offer its pupils (and parents) a worldview formation as well as an interworldview education.

Of course, such an interworldview approach is only one approach to religious education among several other models, especially the monoreligious and multireligious models of religious education. In many countries inside and outside Europe, a confessional model is still operational, and it presents and initiates pupils systematically in only one religion or worldview. Such a model creates a barrier against growing de-traditionalization and religious illiteracy but is confronted increasingly with processes of secularization and pluralization. Another model that receives more and more support among pedagogues and politicians is the multireligious model. It presents religions and worldviews one after the other, or in comparison with each other, but from an outside perspective and without a confessional engagement by the teacher. Such a model wrestles with the question of the possibility and desirability of a neutral position from a methodological and educational perspective.

This volume does not discuss these two alternative models, but goes deeper into the dialogical model. An interworldview approach to religious education has several advantages. It starts more from the perspective and point of view of all pupils. It allows a heterogeneity of positions within different faiths and philosophies of life and invites everyone to engage in interworldview dialogue in the classroom. Interreligious learning remains an important part of interworldview learning, but the latter also makes room for, e.g., atheism and Buddhism. That is why this book also contains contributions from a non-believing perspective and from a Buddhist point of view. It is evident that the concept 'interreligious learning' is a problem from an atheist perspective, but it has also been challenged in recent years by Buddhism. As Helma Ton clarifies in her contribution of this book, Buddhism is not a belief system, and Buddha was not a god. Buddhism is a set of practical guidelines to be practiced personally according to time and place. So, for Buddhism, interreligious learning is too narrow, and not inclusive enough. As Ephraim Meir argues in his contribution from a Jewish perspective, interreligious learning is not excluded from interworldview education but becomes a subcategory. Van Eersel describes, in his contribution, the goal of interworldview education as 'ideological becoming': "the acquisition of a more complete image of ourselves and the realization of human fullness by appropriating the ideological viewpoints of others". Several authors in this book describe the competencies that pupils need to acquire to engage in such an ideological becoming. In the words of Stefan Altmeyer: "the

abilities to name differences, to draw relations and to change perspectives". At the same time, van Eersel rightly warns against defining interworldview education too quickly in the form of 'competencies'. "The downside of this term is that it creates images in our minds of independent techniques or skills that pupils can develop with the help of a well-structured curriculum". In the words of Parker Palmer: "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher"<sup>3</sup>. And one could add, also oriented towards the pupil's identity and integrity. For this purpose, many authors argue for a strong foundation of interworldview education in confessional anthropology and theology. Interworldview learning is clearly distinguished from multi-worldview learning. Such interworldview education is not just a neutral and objective juxtaposition of worldviews, placing the one next to the other. It always recognizes that teachers and pupils are already engaged in a particular worldview. As Michael Bakker and Sacha Bakker say in their contribution, dialogue always starts from one's roots. In interworldview education, all are participants, and no one holds a privileged observer position. There is no *interworldview* education without recognizing and appreciating the differences between worldviews; and their respective engagements. Central to interworldview education is therefore granting hospitality to the other in one's own religion or worldview and accepting the invitation of the other to be their guest. This is based on the common anthropology that we are not independent and self-made beings, but that we owe, as the Russian philosopher Bakhtin argues, our identity to the living relations that we maintain with others. From a believing perspective, such anthropology (and pedagogy) also has a theological foundation of the human being created in God's image.

In such a framework, interworldview learning is a process of translating between worlds driven by the power of dialogue. It works in three movements: it starts with one's own developing worldview and preparing for the encounter with the other, it crosses over to the hermeneutical space of others, accepting their hospitality, and it comes back home transformed by the encounter with others. This learning process happens under the guidance of a teacher or a group of teachers who can speak with authority from their faith or worldview tradition, who have appreciation for other worldview perspectives, and who can moderate such a process of 'crossing over' and 'coming back', especially when pupils encounter prejudices, frustrations, and even conflicts in the classroom<sup>4</sup>.

3. P. PALMER, *The Courage to Teach*, San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 1998, p. 104.

4. D. POLLEFEYT, *Religious Education as Opening the Hermeneutical Space*, in *Journal of Religious Education* 68 (2020) 115-124.

This book develops such understanding of interworldview learning in four parts. The first part presents fundamental approaches to the topic of interworldview education by looking successively to the theological, pedagogical, and philosophical foundations of this new approach of (religious) education. The second part critically approaches interworldview learning. It deals in three contributions with the impact of power in the learning process among different worldviews, the dominance of authoritative discourses in education, and the role of religious identity development of young people. In part three, the book presents how interworldview learning can be realized within different confessional courses: Catholic religion, Orthodox religion, Buddhism, Anglican religion, and in cross-curricular approaches. The fourth and final part of this volume elaborates on the practical implementation of interworldview education. It concretizes interworldview education dealing with the topic of the ecological crisis. It finishes the volume with challenges to evaluate the impact of interworldview education on the interworldview competencies of pupils. The book ends with the presentation of its contributors, and an index of names and topics.

This book consists of twelve contributions that will confront the reader with most aspects of interworldview education, including different confessional perspectives. The opening contribution by Laurent BASANESE (Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Italy) describes from a Roman Catholic perspective the worldwide identity crisis of schooling, especially education at the university, but also in primary and secondary schools. Education is increasingly imprisoned in a market-driven logic with utility and urgency as the sole imperatives and fragmented in disciplines that no longer communicate with each other. In other words, the institutionalization of education has become harmful for education itself. Education is no longer a place to acquire organic and formative knowledge and critical dialogue in a fraternal spirit. Basanese shows in this way why and how religious and interworldview education are under pressure. He warns that this sort of education can also fall victim to formal institutionalization, e.g., encyclopedism, formalism, and abstract knowledge, presenting worldviews only objectively the one next to the other. Inspired by pope Francis' document on *Human Fraternity* (2019), Basanese proposes a new model for education driven by the memory of the past, intellectual benevolence, and adaptive flexibility. In such a model, pupils and teachers learn once again how to communicate between disciplines and ideological backgrounds, in a desire to re-establish knowledge, wisdom, peace, and justice. In order to create an interworldview dialogue, we have to be aware of the precondition for the encounter, namely that we are linked and interdependent, not wholly different, not entirely the same.

In their contribution, Ilham NASSER (International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon, VA, USA) and Mohammed ABU-NIMER (American University, Washington, DC, USA) argue from a Muslim perspective that every pupil deserves to develop their worldview and religious beliefs, from an early age, in dialogue with others. Moreover, interworldview education is a critical strategy in advancing peaceful multicultural societies. They describe the processes that happen in such education in terms of re-reading and re-interpreting one's worldview in the dialogical encounter with the other, as well as the obstacles and difficulties teachers face when moving from an exclusive to an inclusive attitude of pupils. Among the many competencies that are needed, empathy is a central skill that allows the pupil to temporarily delve into the perspective of the other and establish a unique connection with that individual.

Ephraim MEIR (Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel) presents from a Jewish perspective an interreligious theology as the foundation for interfaith education, which he considers a subcategory of interworldview education. His work is inspired by the Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas and their ethical understanding of dialogue (Buber) and the alterity of the other (Levinas). He develops a new concept: 'trans-difference', that considers both the difference and the commonality, the concrete particular and the interaction. In trans-difference, one recognizes the specific and rises above it. Dealing with trans-difference requires six competencies: hospitality, listening, translating, acknowledging, presence, and overcoming bias.

Marianne MOYAERT (KU Leuven, Belgium) looks at interfaith dialogue and interworldview learning from the lens of critical theory. She confronts the reader with the process of 'Othering' that often – consciously or unconsciously – occurs in our relations with 'other' religions and worldviews. In such a process of Othering, the identity of those who stand different in the encounter is marginalized, problematized, or exoticized. Moyaert proposes a shift from focusing on differences between religions to helping pupils to see religious normalcy: what is considered in religion as normal and what is, by contrast, abnormal? Interworldview education, therefore, asks for critical self-reflection and an awareness of oppressive religious structures at work in interreligious encounters. In such a way, dialogue becomes part of the solution rather than part of the problem of social marginalization in the classroom and the dialogue fatigue it creates.

San VAN EERSEL (Windesheim College, Zwolle, the Netherlands) argues for a radical dialogical form of interworldview teaching and learning in all school subjects. He develops the ideas of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), who sees dialogue as the core structure of

human nature. He describes the three main aspects of a robust dialogical approach to worldview education: a dialogical mindset, a dialogical pedagogy, and a dialogical communication. He emphasizes an internally persuasive discourse as opposed to an externally authoritative address. This first form of language and dialogue depends on the responsibility of pupils, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers. Van Eersel warns against the reduction of dialogue and interworldview learning to independent techniques and skills structured in a fixed curriculum. He prefers the term 'qualities' instead of 'competencies' as goals of education, as 'qualities' is a more suitable word to describe the totality of the subjects involved in such dialogical encounters in the classroom. Interworldview education has more to do with wisdom than knowledge. In this way, his vision can contribute to new educational aims for individual and social flourishing.

Gerdien BERTRAM-TROOST (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands) aims at integrating attention to religious identity development, well-being, and interworldview competencies in education. She starts her analysis by observing that diversity does not automatically lead to inter-religious exchange and learning. An increasing amount of pupils are not aware of their worldview. The author offers a 'provocative pedagogy' that integrates attention to religious identity development and interworldview competencies to higher well-being of pupils, especially in Dutch Protestant schools for secondary education in the Netherlands. Such a pedagogy offers an answer to the *homo optionis*, the subject who is more and more under mental pressure because he or she (always) has to choose. Interworldview competencies serve both to stimulate the individual development of young people and enhance their well-being and life together in a diverse society. Bertram-Troost clarifies how this form of guided openness does not have to lead to relativism in which 'everything goes'. Provocative pedagogy means that pupils are challenged and feel encouraged to 'let go' and to 'connect'.

The book also contains reflections from five confessional courses in which interworldview learning can be integrated: Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Buddhism, Anglicanism, and Interworldview Dialogue and the WELT-approach to transversal project work. Jürgen METTEPENNINGEN (KU Leuven, Belgium) shows how interworldview learning is structurally part of the current curriculum of Roman Catholic Religious Education in Flanders. Michael BAKKER (Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands) and Sacha BAKKER (Soul Nederland, Rotterdam, the Netherlands) explain how the goal of 'unity in diversity' in religious education can only be reached by knowing your own (in casu Orthodox) roots and learning

to listen to others. Helma TON (Center for Worldview Education, Utrecht, the Netherlands) offers a unique and critical Buddhist perspective on interworldview learning, especially by showing that the way in which the Buddha taught should also be reflected in the teacher's competencies in Buddhist religious education. Mark P.C. COLLINSON (Winchester School of Mission, Church of England) offers an Anglican, missiological perspective on interworldview learning by incorporating the dynamics of cross-cultural engagement as the essence of the message of Christ. Mark SAEY (Team Active Citizenship, Antwerp, Belgium) advocates for the development of a combination of interworldview competencies and citizenship competencies so that both secular and religious young people can learn reciprocally to help counter polarization and extremism.

How to make interworldview education concrete? Stefan ALTMAYER (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany) highlights the ecological crisis as the most relevant example of an interworldview challenge. In dealing with a practical didactical example, he shows how competencies for interworldview learning include the ability to name differences, draw relationships, and shift perspectives between one's own religious or worldview orientation and that of others.

The final contribution evaluates the impact of interfaith learning on the interfaith competencies of the participants. Hannah J. VISSER (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands) presents the possibilities and challenges in evaluating interfaith initiatives. Central to this are questions of 'how' and 'what' we want to evaluate in interfaith learning. The author makes it clear that 'how' we measure runs the risk of reducing interfaith learning to what can be measured, at the expense of elements that are not easily measured. The analysis clarifies 'what' we best measure in interfaith education: recognizing the uncertainty and nuance of religious and non-religious worldviews; building interfaith relationships, perspective taking and code-switching; communicating across differences, empathizing with the other while refraining from judgment, and attention to power and privilege.

This book brings together the voices of fifteen scholars on interworldview learning, coming from the fields of pedagogy, philosophy, and theology, from seven different confessional perspectives and seven different Western countries. The contributions were written during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the book was finished during the Russian war against Ukraine. It is a time in world history when we became more aware of our global and vulnerable interdependency, and of the fact that the possibility of war, and even religious war, has not left the European continent forever. There are several points on which all authors of this

book agree. (1) Diversity is a given, and it is everywhere: between religions and worldviews, within religions and worldviews, and within any human person's lived religion or worldview. (2) Dialogue is not only a necessity in such a context but is also an intrinsic element of human existence. (3) No longer can anyone claim a 'helicopter-perspective' in the dialogue; we are all participants in the interworldview encounter. Neutrality is not an option, or, even in the best case, an option among other options. (4) Dialogue is not an event that is free of power; on the contrary, it can reproduce and even strengthen the power imbalances among worldviews and their adherents. (5) Education offers unique opportunities to engage pupils in a movement of 'crossing over' and 'coming back', to create an interworldview identity. (6) Interworldview education is only possible when education as an institution transforms itself (again) towards a formation of the integral human person. We hope that this book will inspire the reader to reflect on the many and often complex aspects of this transformation of education, in preparation for another world in which diversity is an opportunity and a source of richness, rather than a source of intolerance, violence and war.

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## PART I

### FUNDAMENTAL APPROACHES