

Religious Education: Measuring impact and the impact of measuring

Recent developments in Catholic Religious Education in Flanders

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Abstract

This chapter contains three sections. Firstly, it presents the Leuven hermeneutical-communicative model of Religious Education (RE) as the theoretical framework of the (only) academic teacher training in Catholic religion in Flanders, Belgium, and as the foundation for the official curriculum of Catholic RE in Flanders. The three integrated goals of RE in Flanders are: discovering the diversity in society, exploring the richness of the Christian tradition, and developing a personal philosophy of life. Secondly, findings of an empirical research project – Bridging the Gap (2020) – are presented. The study explored young adults' perceptions about RE after they finished secondary school. The study shows that both a deductive (reconfessionalising) and an inductive (mono-correlational) approach are no longer prominent at school. The hermeneutical-communicative model is recognised, but the three goals of this approach are not all realised to the same extent: the presentation of the Catholic tradition is overshadowed by attention to the diversity in society and the stress on the identity formation of the pupil. The third section describes how the empirical results underpin the renewal of the Catholic RE curriculum in Flanders, officially at work from 2021, including the 349 compulsory ingredients, among which are 142 ingredients of the Catholic tradition. The chapter finally illustrates how integrating the three goals/perspectives constitutes the heart of the hermeneutical-communicative model and the new curriculum, and how it is supported in Flanders through the Thomas website for RE. The concept of 'hermeneutical intersections' constitutes the transition of this pedagogy of religion to a didactics of religion.

Keywords: religious education, hermeneutics, curriculum impact measurement, identity formation

1. Introduction

The Center for Academic Teacher Training in Religion at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven offers a curriculum to acquire an

Educational Master in Religion.¹ The programme is a preparatory programme of 15 ECTS and a master's degree level of 90 ECTS. The masters is composed of training in theology and religious studies and a didactical practice in religion. It is open to Dutch-speaking students with a bachelor's in theology and religious studies. The curriculum prepares students to become teachers of the Catholic faith in Catholic schools or teachers of Religious Education (RE) in public schools in Flanders. RE in Belgium is confessional. Beliefs are presented from an insider perspective by someone who is a confessional member of that religion, and who has a mandate from the ecclesial authorities to teach that course.

In this chapter, we describe how we have developed a comprehensive curriculum over the past 20 years, to enable students to teach qualitatively from such a confessional perspective in a highly secular school context, including Catholic schools, where radical pluralism is often present among the student and staff population. Moreover, theology students who enroll in KU Leuven's Center for Academic Teacher Training in Religion – even if most of them are baptised Catholics – are themselves often no longer strongly initiated in the Catholic tradition or are no longer practicing Catholics. We also describe the research we do in the Centre on how RE is perceived today by pupils in primary and secondary schools to learn about perception, impact, and appreciation of RE, to invite teachers in training to reflect on these research outcomes, and to improve our curricula. In this chapter, we also show how this measuring of the impact of RE also has an impact on the development of the curriculum itself.

2. A hermeneutical-communicative concept of teacher training in religion

We start this chapter with the central concepts and theories used for the formation of the students in teacher training. Together, they form a consistent approach to context-based religious teacher training, called the Leuven Hermeneutical-Communicative Model of Religious Education (Pollefeyt & Richards, 2019). This model also inspired the curricula in Catholic RE in Flanders. Moreover, other Christian denominations and religions in Flanders are progressing more and more towards this approach of RE. They are uniting in a joint effort against a state-imposed and neutral form of education limited to world views, ethics, and philosophy (Pollefeyt, 2019).

The teacher training situates itself against the background of the general view of the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven) on teaching and learn-

1 For more information, see: KU Leuven, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, *Centre for Academic Teacher's Training in Religion*, https://theo.kuleuven.be/en/research/centres/centr_alo [accessed December 31, 2021].

ing centered around the concept of the ‘disciplinary future self’ of the student (Pollefeyt & Gosselink, 2014). This research-based theory implies that the motivation of the student to study is considerably strengthened when students are invited as soon and as concretely as possible to form an identity as, in this case, future teachers of religion. When students are motivated in this way, they perform better and come to a more in-depth learning in complete identity formation.

Secondly, students must learn to understand and respect the distinction between catechesis and RE (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988). This distinction remains vital given the diversity inside Belgian Catholic schools today and the compulsory aspect of RE in the country. Since catechesis presupposes free participation in a particular faith, RE cannot be restricted to catechesis if it is compulsory for all students. Therefore, learning to understand and appreciate diversity is a central goal and curriculum component in the training of teachers of religion at KU Leuven.

Thirdly, from the outset, students are invited to reflect on their own beliefs and spirituality. They discover step by step if and to what extent they can situate themselves into the normative framework of the hermeneutical-communicative model of confessional RE. Here, a specific empirical instrument is applied with the student to assess their degree and potential for so-called post-critical belief (Krysinska, 2014). Post-critical believers reject a literal reading of religious traditions. They have confronted themselves with the critique *vis-à-vis* religions and religiosity. They are aware of the multitude of worldview options and respect and value these. Nevertheless, they open themselves progressively ‘beyond the critique’ (post-critical) to be inspired by and devoted to the mediations of one’s tradition to relate with the divine.

Crucial to a comprehensive teaching programme is the integration of the theological and the pedagogical components. Students learn at a master’s level to deal with the biblical tradition and human and social experiences from a historical-hermeneutical, a systematic-hermeneutical, and a practical-hermeneutical perspective. They need to learn that there are always interpretations at work in the history of faith, in the understanding of the tradition, and in the praxis of faith. A central theological concept is the ‘recontextualisation’ of the religious tradition by students: to understand the meaning of the tradition in its original context and to learn to re-invent its meaning in a new actual context for pupils today (Horner & Pollefeyt, 2020).

Within this theological context, the hermeneutical-communicative model (HCM) is introduced as a pedagogical theory of learning (Pollefeyt, 2020). Students learn to understand and to develop a three-fold hermeneutics: a hermeneutics of (1) religious texts, of (2) the actual social context, and of (3) the biographies of their pupils. Central to the hermeneutical-communicative model is that students learn to avoid the didactical pitfalls of so-called mono-correlation; this is the (systematic and mechanical) imposition of one possible

meaning (mostly a Christian meaning) on the life experiences of the pupil. HCM works with hermeneutical intersections as a central didactical concept: the conflicts of interpretations that become the engine of the didactical learning process. Such an approach respects the diversity of worldview interpretations in the classroom, gives room for a witness by the teacher of the particularity of the Christian/Catholic perspectives, and invites all pupils to enter into a dialogue to deepen their worldview or faith.

Another central framework is the development of so-called inter-worldview competencies among the pupils.² Students become capable of crossing over their own hermeneutical space to that of the other and coming back in a transformed way.³

In the didactical implementation of HCM, we instruct future teachers to follow the *SWIM strategy*. Future RE teachers have to act as Specialists (S) in their own and other traditions, as Witnesses (W) of the tradition from which they teach, and as Moderators (M) of a hermeneutical and communicative learning process of the pupils (Pollefeyt, 2020). In taking up these three roles, future teachers of religion realise the following three goals with their pupils. (1) First, becoming aware of and being challenged by the plurality of world views in our contemporary world and society. (2) Second, knowing and situating the meaning of the Christian faith in the context of a plurality of world views. (3) Third, empowering pupils to take account of their worldview in light of the plural character of world views and dialogue with the meaning offered by the Christian faith (Pollefeyt, 2020).

Since 2002, to support future teachers in their professional development the Centre hosts a website for all religious educators in the Low Countries: Thomas.⁴ More than 5,5000 members are registered on this site. Here, students learn to interact with colleagues and use the electronic instruments and applications developed to support teachers of RE, such as an instrument to communicate with the inspectors of RE. The Centre also created a series of manuals for all six years of secondary school based on the HCM model called *Caleidoscoop* (Pollefeyt, 2007–2010).

Finally, a religion teacher is often also the person responsible for pastoral work at a school and acts as an identity coach at the school level. The Centre therefore has an extensive international research line called ECSI or Enhancing Catholic School Identity, centered around the idea of the so-called Catholic dia-

2 Thomas, "Interlevensbeschouwelijke competenties in het kader van dialog en samenwerking tussen levensbeschouwingen op school," <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/interlevensbeschouwelijke-competenties/> (viewed 12.31.2021).

3 D. Pollefeyt, "Hoe vormgeven aan 'interlevensbeschouwelijke dialoog' tussen de levensbeschouwelijke vakken in het gemeenschapsonderwijs? (October 2019)," <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2019/10/17/allemaal-dialoogscholen/> (viewed 12.31.2021).

4 Thomas, "www.godsdienstonderwijs.be".

logue school (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010). The ECSI research is compulsory for students in the teacher training programme through an international MOOC offered on the platform of EDx and so it is also available for a broader audience.⁵ The Catholic dialogue school is a place of dialogue between a context of diversity and the Catholic tradition. The course in religion is the training ground for such a dialogue. Religion teachers are worldview specialists, witnesses of the tradition, and moderators in such a dialogue.

This HCM distinguishes itself from other existing models of RE. I refer to four alternative models. (1) RE as *reconfessionalisation*: this is the systematic initiation of all pupils in one religious system, in this case, Catholicism, or at least the exclusive presentation of the Catholic tradition to all pupils in an uncompromising manner. It is RE as a form of (new) evangelisation and catechesis as if all pupils are Catholics or should become Catholics. A problem with this model is that it is rejected massively by pupils and has little support with staff. (2) RE as *Christian values education*: a model that tries to find among a diversity of pupils a harmonising, common denominator they all can accept; and that is primarily expressed in the form of universal values, which are then connected with the Christian story through mono-correlation. A danger of this model is that in this movement, the particularity of the Christian tradition gets lost, pupils do not feel respected in their difference, and eventually the model becomes counterproductive due to horizontalising the faith and it leads pupils to experience RE as predictable and even manipulative. (3) RE as *multi-religious learning*. In this model, worldviews are presented from an outsider's perspective comparatively as alternatives, and the teacher is neutral. In such an approach, one runs the risk of not doing justice to the 'inside' of a religion or worldview or reducing these to formal characteristics that are not recognisable by its members. It is tough to teach pupils to engage in disengaged learning that asks to abstract concrete religious positions. (4) *Secularisation*: in this model, only general human topics are discussed that are unrelated to particular religions (such as war and violence, bio-ethical issues, human rights, etc.). RE becomes a course in human sciences in the broad sense of the word. This often happens more implicitly with teachers who go into a kind of survival strategy in confrontation with religious diversity and even an anti-religious climate in the classroom.

As of this moment, HCM has been in place for more than 20 years in Flanders. It has integrated itself into the official curriculum for Catholic RE in secondary schools, the training of students, and manuals for RE (Erkende Instantie, 2019). It has become an aspect of the professional learning of teachers and of inspection. The approach of the Catholic dialogue school has been accepted by the

5 EdX, "KU Leuven, Enhancing Catholic School Identity (Februari 2021)," <https://www.edx.org/course/enhancing-catholic-school-identity-2> (viewed 12.31.2021).

Flemish bishops (Belgische bisschoppenconferentie, 2017). Also, on the level of the universal church, we see a growing openness for a hermeneutical and dialogical approach for catechesis, RE, and Catholic school identity (e.g., Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, 2020, nr. 196, speaks about the need for developing ‘a hermeneutical capacity’ in the learner).

3. Bridging the gap: How young adolescents look back to their RE classes

From September to December 2020, the Centre conducted quantitative and qualitative research to measure the impact of RE on students in the Catholic Association KU Leuven (university and university colleges). We already had extensive data on the religious profile of pupils in Flanders in primary and secondary school (age 6–18), and of teachers and parents in Catholic schools (age 25+)⁶; but we had no data for young adults in the age group of 18–25 years old. That is why this research was called Bridging the Gap. This research looked into young adults’ worldviews and asked for their perception and appreciation for RE in secondary school. The questionnaire⁷ contains 109 questions, plus the post-critical belief scale, and it was filled in by 1,119 respondents with an average age of 20 years old (30.2% male and 69.8% female). They all study at a Catholic institution of higher education in all academic fields (human sciences, positive sciences, medical sciences). 91.4% of them are baptised in the Catholic Church, and 92% of them have followed courses of Catholic RE (2 hours per week) since the age of 6.

Data analysis allowed the researchers to distinguish seven different groups in the population with a different outlook on faith and worldviews (Van Lierde, 2021).

1. ‘Catholics’ who are practicing their faith regularly with a solid attachment to the Church.
2. ‘Muslims’ who are practicing their faith regularly with a solid attachment to Islam.
3. ‘Nominal Christians’ with some affinity with the Christian message, but not very deep, and with a weak or no relationship with God. The Christian

6 For more information, see: Thomas, “Grootschalig empirisch onderzoek naar leerkrachten en leerlingen rooms-katholieke godsdienst secundair onderwijs,” <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/grootschalig-empirisch-onderzoek-naar-leerkrachten-en-leerlingen-rooms-katholieke-godsdienst-secundair-onderwijs/> (viewed 12.31.2021).

7 See: D. Pollefeyt, et. al., “Bridging the Gap. Quantitative Research Questionnaire on the Religious and Worldview Profile of Young Adults between 18 and 25 Years Old in Flanders and Australia,” <https://www.ecsi.site/uploads/file/questionnaire-bridging-the-gap.pdf> (viewed 12.31.2021).

story gives orientation in terms of values and crucial moments of life in rituals and sacraments.

4. 'General religious' people who are open for immanent or quasi-transcendent world views and spiritualities. They search for something higher, but they refuse to identify with a particular religious or other tradition.
5. 'Pluralistic atheists' have no personal belief in a transcendent reality. They are not against religious faith, but they are critical of religious institutions and will strongly resist proselytism efforts.
6. 'Normative atheists' start from the normativity of atheism. They explicitly resist spirituality and even more so, organised religion. Humanism for them asks for liberation from every religiosity.
7. 'Indifferent' people call themselves materialists, nihilists, or hedonists. They are not interested in worldview questions at all, not even normative atheism.

Figure 1 shows the division among these groups in our population of students participating in Catholic higher education.

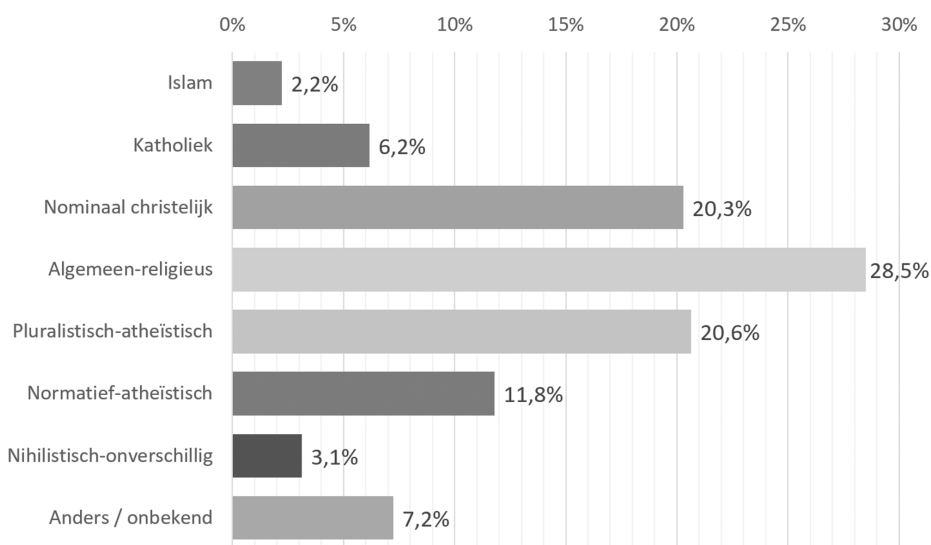


Figure 1: Different groups in the population of students participating in Catholic higher education

The categorisation reveals the plurality of worldviews among adolescents in Catholic higher education. 91.4% of them are baptised, but only 6.2% identify themselves as religious Catholics. Only a minority of 2.2% of Muslim students can be found in this population of higher education students. More than 1 in 5 students identify themselves as 'nominal Christian'. They see themselves in the Christian realm but have little knowledge or show little interest in understanding or deepening faith. 28.5% are students that are open for transcendent

and spiritual experiences: they are clearly in search for meaning and are open to religious traditions even if they are not engaged in either of these. 20.6% are pluralistic atheists: they do not accept or experience transcendence themselves but show openness and even curiosity *vis-à-vis* religious traditions. For this reason, they are also at a distance from a normative atheistic position which lacks such openness and epistemological modesty. 11.8% of the students situate themselves in this more radical atheistic perspective, which leaves no room for much diversity of worldviews. Their position does not even tolerate very much pluralistic atheism because of its relativism regarding atheistic truth claims. It is interesting to see this trend towards a more strict position, as is also known (on the religious side) among Catholics in previous generations. It is remarkable that we cannot identify such a more strict position among the Catholic subpopulations. It is shown that 6.2% of Catholics combine their Catholic stance with an openness (and even a relativism) concerning other worldview positions. In general, it is essential to see that most students do not appreciate the radicality of a normative atheistic stance and prefer more moderate (believing and unbelieving) epistemological positions. Finally, amongst the group of nihilistic-indifferent students 3.1% see no meaning in religions and worldviews and reject the search for meaning itself as meaningless. 7.2% of students answered inconsistently and could not be put in one of the six categories.

One of the main questions in Bridging the Gap is about the impact of (Catholic) RE on the identity of these young adult students. The question being: 'The course in religion has contributed strongly to the formation of my vision and identity concerning world views'. We present here the results for (compulsory) Catholic RE. In general, 37.1% of the students recognise the positive impact of RE on their vision and identity. 20.9% have no idea about its impact and 40% indicate that RE has no impact on it. 9.6% reject very strongly a positive impact, almost the same as the amount of normative atheists. The global picture is thus mixed: almost 4/10 are positive, 2/10 are in doubt, and 4/10 are negative on the impact of RE on worldview and identity. It is interesting to see how this appreciation of the impact of the courses in religion differs in the seven subpopulations.

It is not surprising that Muslim students see little effect of Catholic RE on their Muslim identity (3.24) and that Catholic students are most favorable (4.65). But also nominal Christians are optimistic about the impact of the course (4.65). General religious people are in doubt: some appreciate the effect of the study, others see no natural result, which ends in a middle position (3.98). Atheistic students reject the impact of RE on their identity, but this is much more the case for the normative atheists (3.07) than for the pluralistic atheists who have a more nuanced appreciation (3.60). Nihilistic and indifferent students negatively appreciate the course in religion in terms of impact (2.38). Since Catholic RE is compulsory for all students in Catholic schools in Belgium, some conclusions can be drawn from these results. The course positively impacts Catholic and

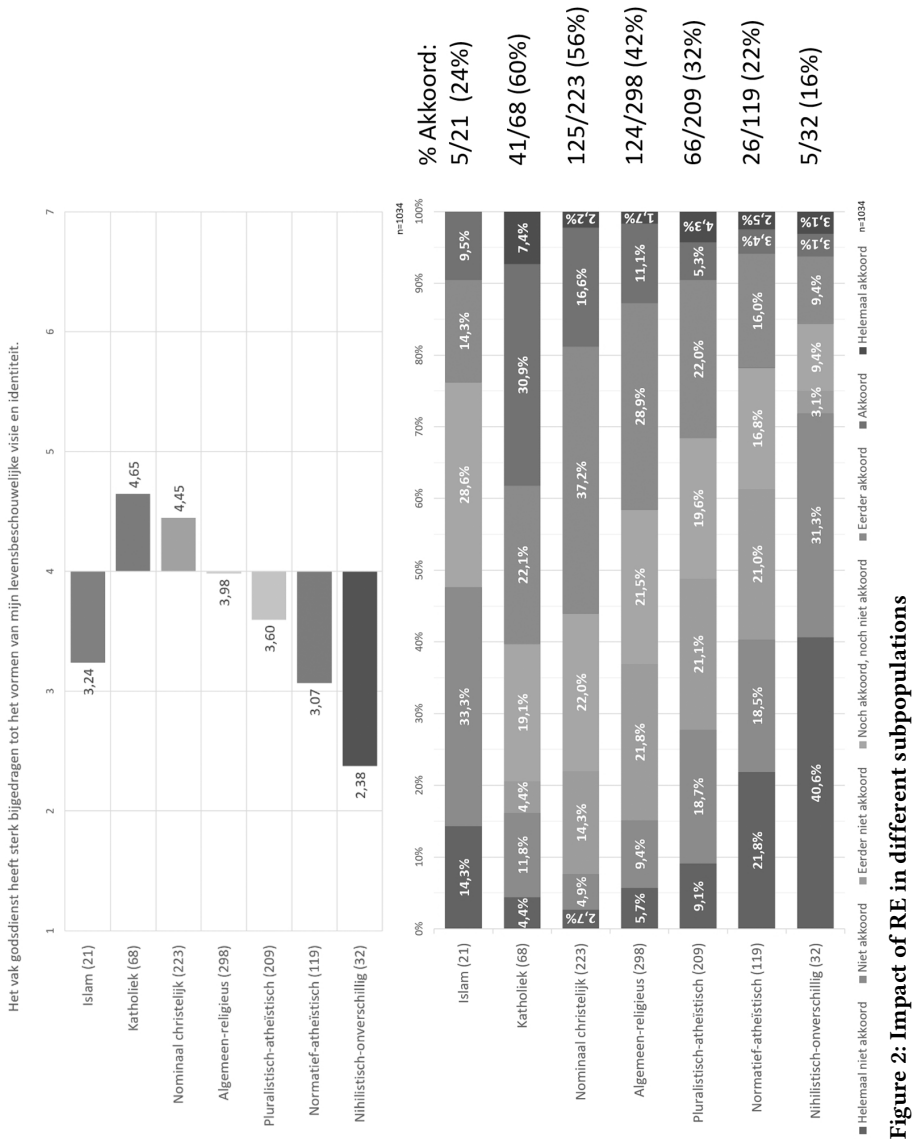


Figure 2: Impact of RE in different subpopulations

nominate Christian students and it is met by an openness from the general-religious students. It makes sense for these students to choose a Catholic school where this course is taught or a non-Catholic school where they can choose this course. Also, general religious students are open for classes in Catholic RE as long as no attempts are made to push them into a Catholic perspective. Even one-third of the pluralistic atheists say that they have been positively influenced by a (confessional) course in religion. Some will ask why normative atheists and nihilists opt for Catholic RE and/or for Catholic schools. On the other hand, a question could also be how, within the framework of a hermeneu-

tical-communicative model, one can also better deal with these students in an open way given the dominance of the Catholic school network in Flanders.

A central interest of the Bridging the Gap research is understanding the way students have experienced RE and especially the pedagogical methods used in class, more specifically, the hermeneutical-communicative model of RE. We have presented to students the five different pedagogical approaches that we developed in the first paragraph of this chapter. These were summarised via a simple statement:

1. Reconfessionalisation (a deductive approach): 'In the course of religion, I experienced that (mostly) the intention was to convince me of one specific religion'.
2. Christian values education (a mono-correlative approach): 'Even though the course of religion started from the personal experiences of the pupils and the spirit of the times, it (mostly) usually ended with the "truth" of one specific religion'.
3. Hermeneutical-communicative education (a dialogical approach): 'In the class of RE, one (mostly) used one particular religion as a specific key of interpretation to understand the many dimensions of life better, without keeping silent about other interpretation keys'.
4. Pluralistic education (a neutral, comparative approach): 'In the course of RE (mostly) many religions and world view approaches were featured next to each other, and the teacher maintained a neutral point of view towards them'.
5. Secularisation (a course on general human topics): 'In the course of religion, (mostly) general human themes and activities were featured that have nothing to do with religion'.

In Figures 3 and 4, we show the data from all students who followed the course in Catholic RE in secondary school (n=1034). It is immediately clear that most of the students have not experienced the course as an effort towards reconfessionalisation (average: 3.32/7), even if 25% agree to some degree with this statement. Also, the inductive approach connecting values to Christian content is (no longer) the dominant pedagogical approach in Catholic RE in Flanders (3.87/7) even if more than 40% of young adults have memories of this approach. The hermeneutical-communicative model is recognised by more than 55% of the students (4.43/7). This is not surprising given the fact that this model constitutes the foundation of the curricula for RE since 1999. More surprising is that students see the pluralistic (4.54/7) and secular (5.06/7) approach more at work in their classes of RE. This is surprising given the confessional nature of the course and the role of the teacher as a witness of the Catholic tradition. For the secular approach, this is seen by more than 70% of the students in classrooms of religion.

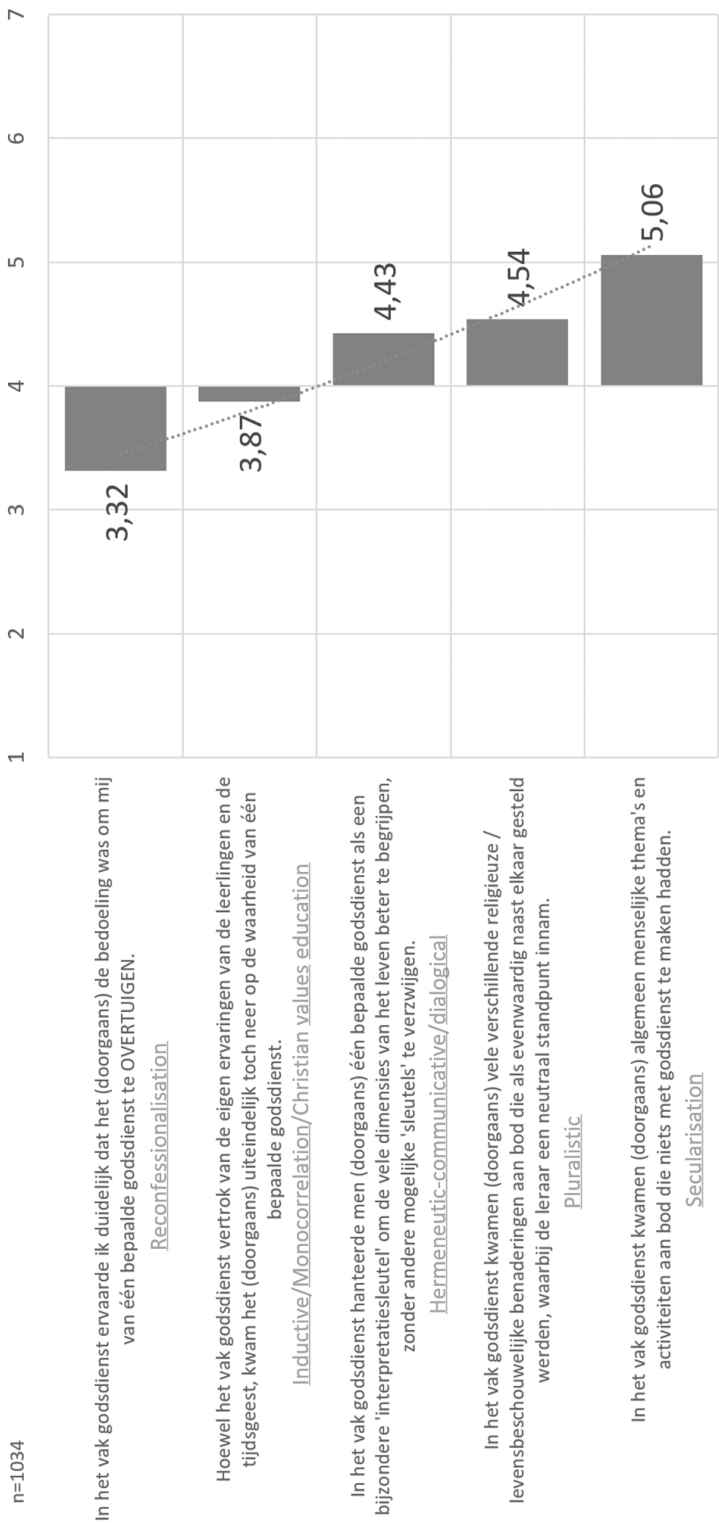


Figure 3: Types of RE experienced by the students

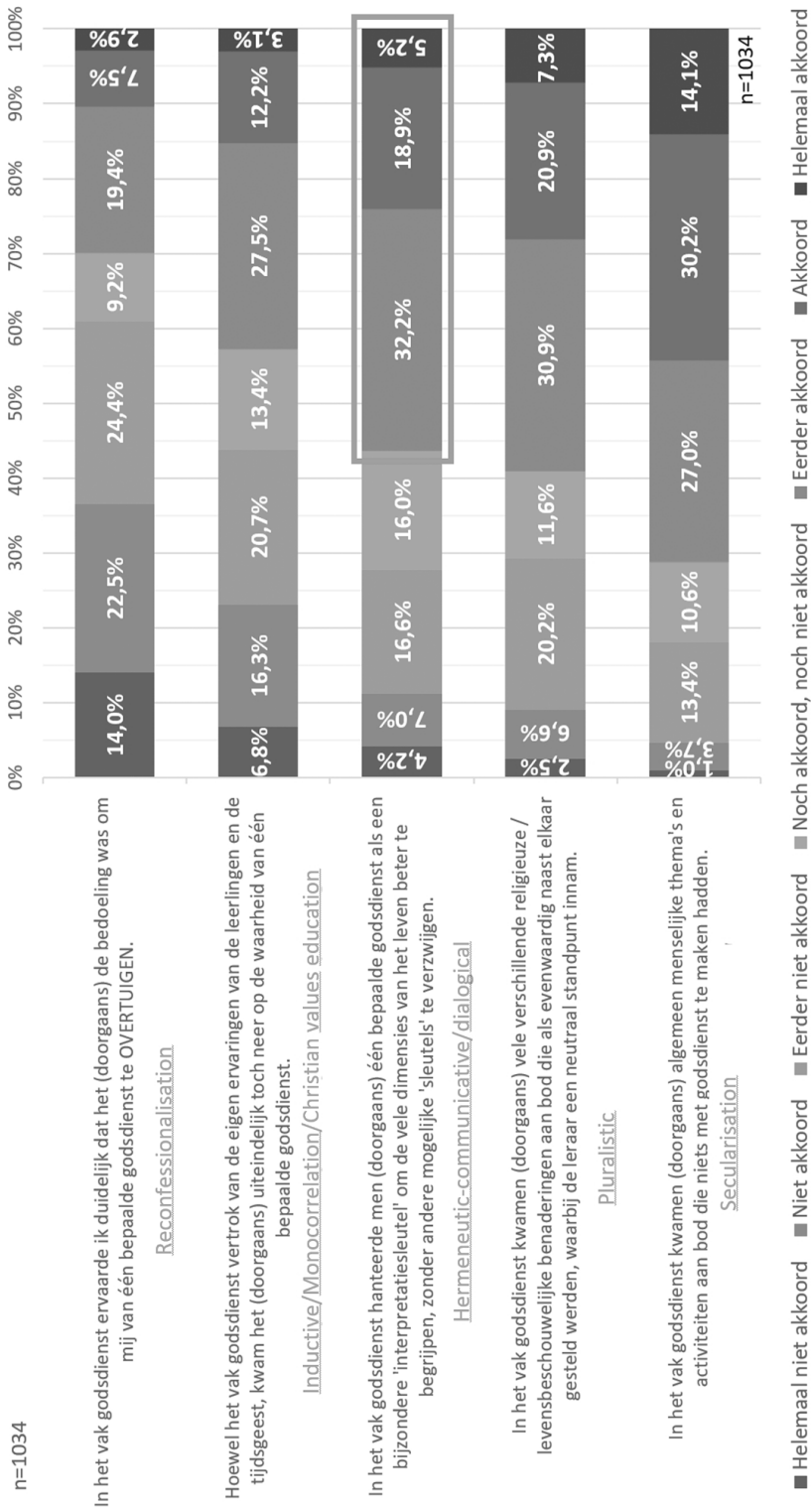


Figure 4: Types of RE experienced by the students in percentages

What conclusions can be drawn from this (post-)measurement? A first conclusion is that given the plural context of classes of RE in Flanders and their compulsory aspect, a hermeneutical-communicative model is the only confessional model that is recognised as such by students in higher education. Deductive or mono-correlational confessional approaches are on their way back. Students see at the same time a hermeneutical-communicative, a pluralistic, and a secular system at work. At this point, we have to repeat the three goals that form together the hermeneutical-communicative model: becoming aware of and being challenged by the plurality of world views in our contemporary world and society (goal 1); knowing and situating the meaning of the Christian faith in the context of a plurality of world views (goal 2); and empowering the pupil to take account of one's worldview (goal 3). One can say that the three most recognised models by young adults refer to the three goals that should be realised simultaneously in hermeneutical-communicative Catholic RE. The first goal is recognised as a pluralistic model of RE, the second goal in the hermeneutical presentation of the (Catholic) tradition, and the third goal is identity formation in expressing general human topics. In this way, one can conclude that religious teachers in Flanders realise the three primary goals of the ruling curriculum. However, there is an apparent lack of balance between the three goals, at least in the perception of former pupils in RE. The anthropological approach is much more recognised than the pluralistic approach and the pluralistic approach much more than the hermeneutical approach. This underpins an often heard statement in the church and society, that RE is 'no longer (enough) about (Catholic) religion' but 'only' about general human topics such as love, human rights or ecology. Even if this is not a nuanced critique, but rather a cliché itself, our data indicate that there is some truth in this critique *vis-à-vis* RE.

4. Developments in the curriculum of RE

The Bridging the Gap research took place in 2020. On September 1, 2021, the Belgian bishops launched an actualisation of the existing curriculum for Catholic RE in Flanders. The renewed curriculum can be found online on the platform of Thomas of the KU Leuven.⁸ The launching of the new curriculum and the publication of the results of our Bridging the Gap research were presented at the same time in the Flemish media.⁹ The renewed curriculum can be seen as a positive response to challenges that were brought up by the

8 See: Thomas, Erkende Instantie 2019, "Leerplan r.-k. godsdienst," <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/leerplan-secundair/> (viewed 12.31.2021).

9 See, Thomas, "Nieuwsbrief. Jongvolwassenen tussen 18–25 jaar: wat geloven ze? Hoe kijken ze terug op hun godsdienstonderwijs?," (viewed 12.31.2021).

Bridging the Gap research. For the different so-called ‘terrains’ of the curriculum, learning goals were formulated that need to be understood from three different perspectives: the plurality of worldviews, the power of the Catholic tradition, and the personal identity formation of the pupil. In the following figure (Figure 5), we present the terrain of ‘love and friendship’ for pupils in year 11–12 (age: 16–18 years old). The RE teacher has to realise seven goals, e.g. nr. 7: ‘express how a Christian view of love and friendship relates to and/or challenges one’s view’. The teacher should integrate the three perspectives into his teaching: plurality/context, Christian faith/tradition, and identity/pupil perspective. This integration of the three perspectives is called the ‘integral approach’ of RE. These three perspectives cannot be separated from each other because only developing the first perspective would reduce the course to multi-religious learning, only developing the second perspective would reduce RE to catechetical initiation, and only developing the third perspective would make RE a course in anthropology and secular identity formation.

In the words of the curriculum: ‘It is precisely in the integral dynamics of these three perspectives or ingredients that the fruitfulness, and thus the normativity of the curriculum lies. Moreover, and inseparably within that normativity: if all objectives in the field are to be achieved, all ingredients must be addressed at least once. In this way, the hermeneutic-communicative process is given hands and feet’.¹⁰ To fully understand this central quote from the renewed curriculum, it is important to know that for each of the three perspectives the curriculum proposes compulsory ingredients to enrich the hermeneutical dialogue around the terrain goals: 349 in total for six years of secondary education. Each time, the teacher should select one or more ingredients from at least two perspectives to realise the terrain goal (see also Figure 5). In this way, the renewed curriculum tries to give an answer to the growing need for religious literacy among pupils.

In answering the challenge of the balance between the three perspectives: 108 ingredients are dedicated to the plurality in society, 142 to the Christian tradition, and 99 to the identity formation of the pupil. The (unequal) spread of the ingredients over the three perspectives is an understandable correction in light of the imbalance which was revealed in the empirical section of this chapter. The 142 ingredients of the Christian tradition guarantee over the six years of secondary school a systematic presentation of the Catholic tradition, but each time in dialogue with the plural context and in service of the identity formation of the pupil. For example, to realise the quoted terrain goal number 7, teachers can integrate ingredient nr. 209 (romanticisation and eroticisation: a perspective of plurality/context), nr. 218 (Song of Songs: Christian faith/tradi-

¹⁰ Thomas, Erkende Instantie 2019, “Voorwoord leerplan r.-k. godsdienst secundair onderwijs,” <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/leerplan-secundair-voorwoord/> (viewed 12.31.2021).

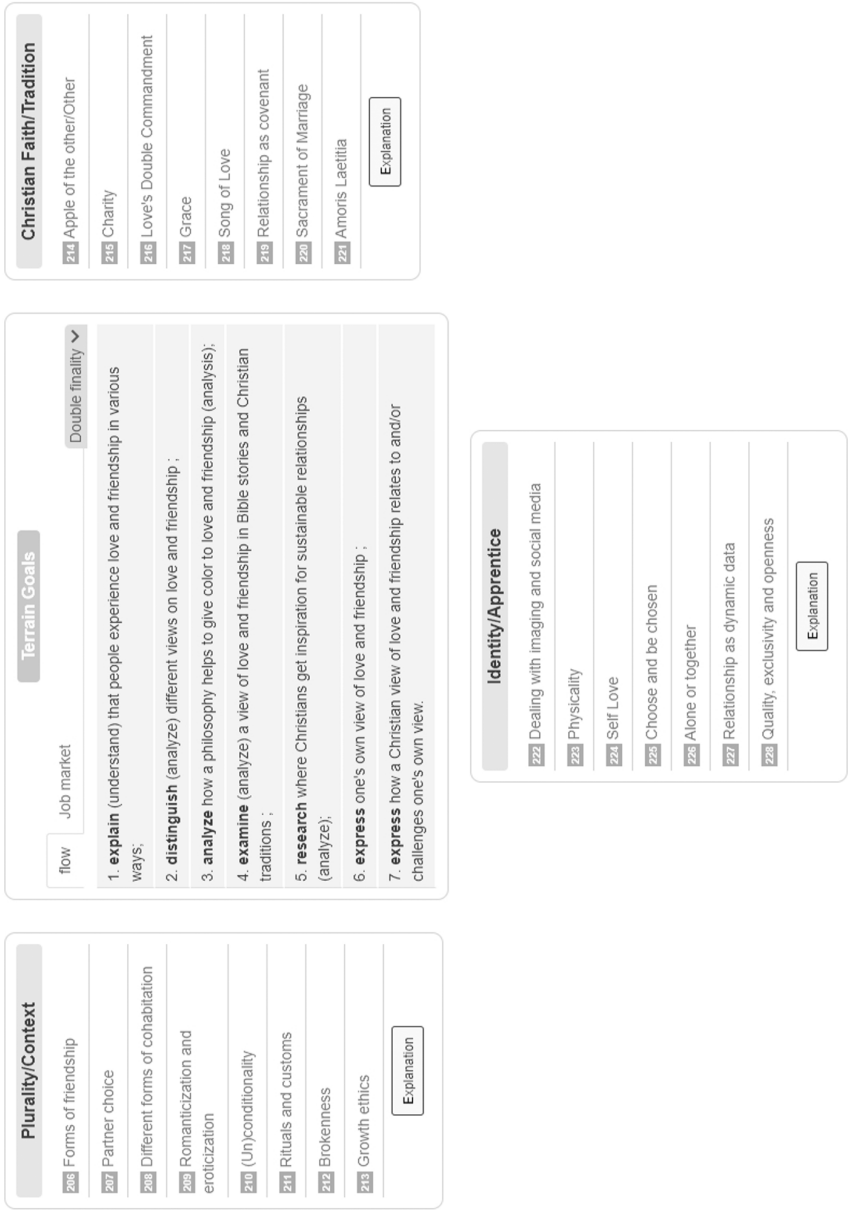


Figure 5: 'love and friendship' in RE for pupils year 11–12

tion perspective), and nr. 228 (quality, exclusivity, and openness: perspective of identity). The goal of the religious course is then not to harmonise these three perspectives/ingredients (mono-correlation) but to show how they represent different – partly overlapping, partly enriching, partly conflicting – interpretations and thus experiences of the reality of love and friendship and to invite pupils into the tension between the ‘text’ of the tradition and the ‘context’ of

contemporary society to make their own choices in communication with the teacher and each other (therefore: hermeneutical and communicative).

The new curriculum offers also a theological underpinning of this ‘integral dynamic’ of Catholic RE: ‘The hermeneutic approach of tradition can already be found in the Jewish roots of Christianity. In Judaism, it is said that God in heaven rejoices with every new interpretation given to Scripture. Jesus, too, in his day brought forth his “contrary God” of Love through stories that could speak to and change people in their context, placing their lives in a new perspective and transforming them’ (Erkende Instantie, 2019, nr. 7). The realisation of this model of RE implies that RE teachers have a good specialised knowledge of the Catholic tradition: the Bible, the Christian concept of God, the Christian tradition, Christian spirituality, the place of the church in the world. Often, the challenge already begins here. Secularisation and pluralisation are not only challenges for RE; they are also challenges for the training of teachers in RE itself. Often, (new) students lack elementary experience and knowledge of the Christian tradition and spirituality.

It is for this reason that the church in Belgium sponsors the *Thomas* website for RE. Thomas is created to support teachers in their formation, professionalisation, and spirituality.¹¹ Recently, Thomas developed a separate section with a webpage for each of the 349 ingredients of the new curriculum.¹² The information for the perspective of the Christian tradition was also published in print in three volumes: *Letter & Geest I* (year 7–8) (192 pages), *Letter & Geest II* (year 9–10) (192 pages), and *Letter & Geest III* (year 11–12) (280 pages) (Pollefeyt & Hendrickx, 2020 & 2021) [in English: ‘Letter & Spirit’]. In this way, RE teachers (in training) also receive essential specialist information of the tradition needed to realise the integral dynamic of hermeneutical-communicative learning. Every ingredient’s page is constructed in the same way: (1) starting point to teach on the ingredient in society, church, and life world of the pupils; (2) place in the curriculum, the terrain goals, and the inter-worldview competencies; (3) hermeneutical intersections; (4) recent theological background information; (5) list for further reading and study; (6) online didactical impulses and suggestions on the Thomas website. We already referred to the ‘hermeneutical intersections’ in this type of RE in the first paragraph of this chapter. At this point of our reflection, we can show their central place. Hermeneutical intersections are locations of tension and conflicting interpretations that exist or emerge in the

11 See: Thomas, “www.godsdienstonderwijs.be”.

12 See: Thomas, “Overzicht ingrediënten leerplan r.-k. godsdienst,” <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/leerplan-secundair/ingredienten/> (viewed 12.31.2021)..

classroom and refer back to various presuppositions of different life stances.¹³ Hermeneutical intersections or ‘problems of interpretation’:

- are intrinsically tied to the existence of a particular issue or problem;
- emerge in the class in which different interpretations of a particular issue or problem exist (between the teachers and pupils or between the pupils);
- lead to a confrontation with lesson ingredients introduced in the lesson from different sources: narrative tradition, personal stories, and the dominant culture, with a privileged reference to the Catholic tradition.

Let us continue with our example of ingredient nr. 218 of the curriculum. In that case, *Thomas* identifies and develops five different hermeneutical intersections related to the Song of Songs: (1) love among human beings *versus* love in which God is involved; (2) spiritual *versus* erotic-sexual love; (3) idealised and realistic love; (4) narcissistic *versus* love of the other; (5) romantic love *versus* friendship or charity.¹⁴

In the hermeneutical-communicative model the quality of RE is associated with the ability of teachers to present these intersections on the particular issues in the classroom, expose these intersections, and then turn them into ‘engines’ driving the lessons towards the worldview growth of all students.

5. Summary

This chapter contains three sections. Firstly, we presented the Leuven hermeneutical-communicative model of RE as the theoretical framework of the (only) academic teacher training in Catholic religion in Flanders, Belgium, and as the foundation for the official curriculum of Catholic RE in Flanders. The three integrated goals of RE in Flanders are discovering the diversity in society, exploring the richness of the Christian tradition, and developing a personal philosophy of life. Secondly, we presented empirical research, *Bridging the Gap* (2020), that researched young adults’ perception about RE after they finished secondary school. The research shows that both a deductive (reconfessionalising) and inductive (mono-correlational) approach are no longer prominent at school. The hermeneutical-communicative model is recognised, but the three goals of this approach are not all realised to the same extent: the presentation of the Catholic tradition is overshadowed by the attention for the diversity in society and the stress on the identity formation

13 D. Pollefeyt, “Hermeneutical-communicative Religious Education in a Nutshell,” <https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/press/ecsi/files/2019/04/12.-Didier-Pollefeyt-Hermeneutic-Communicative-Religious-Education-in-a-nutshell-EN-v1.1.pdf> (viewed 12.31.2021)..

14 Thomas, “Hooglied van de liefde (Theologische achtergrond),” <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/hooglied-van-de-liefde/> (viewed 12.31.2021)..

of the pupil. The third section shows how the empirical results underpin the renewal of the Catholic RE curriculum in Flanders, officially at work since 2021, including the 349 compulsory ingredients, among which are 142 ingredients of the Catholic tradition. The chapter finally illustrates how integrating the three goals/perspectives constitutes the heart of the hermeneutical-communicative model and the new curriculum, and how it is supported in Flanders through the *Thomas website* for RE. The concept of ‘hermeneutical intersections’ constitutes the transition of this pedagogy of religion to a didactics of religion.

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