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Why Democracy Needs Religious Education

Abstract (English) – Why Democracy Needs Religious Education. Contemporary liberal democracies face profound crises of meaning, social participation, and fragmentation that threaten democratic flourishing amid growing worldview illiteracy, spiritual disorientation, and polarization. This article argues that confessional religious education, approached through a hermeneutical and communicative framework, provides crucial resources for democratic renewal that conventional citizenship education fails to deliver. While citizenship education attempts to address democratic deficits through ostensibly neutral, knowledge-based approaches, it suffers from over-reliance on abstract concepts divorced from lived experience, neglect of existential and meaning-making dimensions, and insufficient motivational resources to inspire sustained civic engagement. Confessional religious education offers distinctive contributions through narrative foundations that integrate civic knowledge into meaningful life stories, identity-forming capacities that address existential questions, substantial moral frameworks that motivate democratic participation, and dialogical methodologies that facilitate genuine engagement across profound differences. The hermeneutical-communicative model balances committed engagement with particular traditions and pluralistic openness that develop students' interpretive competencies, narrative skills, and dialogue capacities essential for democratic citizenship. This approach cultivates democratic virtues that are necessary for sustaining pluralistic democracies where citizens maintain both distinctiveness and solidarity.

Keywords: religious education, citizenship education, hermeneutical-communicative pedagogy, narrative identity, democracy

Abstract (Français) – Pourquoi la démocratie a besoin de l'éducation religieuse. Les démocraties libérales contemporaines font face à de profondes crises de sens, de participation sociale et de fragmentation qui menacent l'épanouissement démocratique dans un contexte d'analphabétisme idéologique croissant, de désorientation spirituelle et de polarisation. Cet article soutient que l'éducation religieuse confessionnelle, abordée par un cadre herméneutique et communicatif, fournit des ressources cruciales pour le renouveau démocratique que l'éducation civique conventionnelle échoue à offrir. Tandis que l'éducation civique tente de remédier aux déficits démocratiques par des approches ostensiblement neutres et fondées sur la connaissance, elle souffre d'une dépendance excessive aux concepts abstraits détachés de l'expérience vécue, de la négligence des dimensions existentielles et de

création de sens, et de ressources motivationnelles insuffisantes pour inspirer un engagement civique durable. L'éducation religieuse confessionnelle offre des contributions distinctives par des fondements narratifs qui intègrent la connaissance civique dans des histoires de vie significatives, des capacités de formation identitaire abordant les questions existentielles, des cadres moraux substantiels qui motivent la participation démocratique, et des méthodologies dialogiques qui facilitent un engagement authentique à travers de profondes différences. Le modèle herméneutique-communicatif équilibre l'engagement existentiel avec des traditions particulières et l'ouverture pluraliste, développant les compétences interprétatives, narratives et dialogiques des étudiants essentielles pour la citoyenneté démocratique. Cette approche cultive les vertus démocratiques nécessaires pour soutenir les démocraties pluralistes où les citoyens maintiennent à la fois distinction et solidarité.

Abstract (Deutsch) – Warum die Demokratie religiöse Bildung braucht. Zeitgenössische liberale Demokratien stehen vor tiefgreifenden Krisen von Bedeutung, gesellschaftlicher Teilhabe und Fragmentierung angesichts wachsender Weltanschauungsunkennntnis, spiritueller Desorientierung und Polarisierung. Dieser Artikel argumentiert, dass konfessionelle religiöse Bildung mit ihrem hermeneutischen und kommunikativen Rahmen entscheidende Ressourcen für die Stärkung der Demokratie bietet, die herkömmliche staatsbürgerliche Bildung nicht liefern kann. Während letztere versucht, demokratische Defizite durch scheinbar neutrale, wissensbasierte Ansätze zu beheben, leidet sie unter abstrakten, erfahrungsfernen Konzepten, der Vernachlässigung existenzieller und sinngebender Dimensionen sowie unzureichenden motivationalen Ressourcen, um nachhaltiges bürgerschaftliches Engagement zu inspirieren. Konfessionelle religiöse Bildung schult narrative Grundlagen, um Demokratiebildung in persönliche Lebensgeschichten zu integrieren, weiterhin identitätsbildende Fähigkeiten, sich mit existenziellen Fragen zu beschäftigen, sowie moralische Grundsätze, die zu demokratischer Beteiligung motivieren, und dialogische Methoden, die Auseinandersetzungen über tiefgreifende Unterschiede hinweg ermöglichen. Das hermeneutisch-kommunikative Modell stellt ein Gleichgewicht zwischen der engagierten Beschäftigung mit bestimmten Traditionen und pluralistischer Offenheit her und entwickelt interpretative Kompetenzen, narrative Fähigkeiten und Dialogkapazitäten der Lernenden, die für demokratische Partizipation unerlässlich sind. Dieser Ansatz kultiviert demokratische Tugenden, die notwendig sind, um pluralistische Demokratien zu erhalten, in denen Bürger sowohl ihre Eigenart als auch ihre Solidarität bewahren.

1. Introduction

Contemporary liberal democracies face a profound crisis of meaning and social participation that manifests itself in fragmented communities, weakened shared values, and a diminished capacity for mutual understanding in an increasingly pluralistic society. The growing fragmentation of society, coupled with rising

individualism and the erosion of traditional sources of meaning, has created a crisis. This crisis threatens the social cohesion that is essential for democratic flourishing. This article argues that when approached through a hermeneutical and communicative lens, confessional religious education can provide crucial resources for addressing these challenges. Far from being an obstacle to democratic citizenship, properly conceived religious education can foster interpretive competences, narrative engagement, and dialogical skills that are vital for democracy's renewal. Drawing on research in religious pedagogy and citizenship education, we explore the unique contribution of confessional religious education to democratic formation. The article first examines the contemporary pressures facing democracy, then analyzes the limitations of conventional citizenship education, before proposing how confessional religious education offers distinctive resources for democratic renewal through its narrative approach, its capacities for identity-formation, and its hermeneutical methodology. This article is primarily a conceptual-theoretical contribution that brings insights from political philosophy (and especially Holocaust theology, see Pollefeyt 2018), educational theory, and religious studies research, while drawing supporting evidence from empirical studies on belief styles and religious education outcomes.

2. Democracy Under Pressure

Today, democracies are experiencing profound challenges that extend beyond political institutions to more profound questions of meaning, belonging, and social cohesion. The foundations that traditionally supported democratic life have eroded, creating vulnerabilities that manifest themselves in various, often troubling ways across societies.

A primary challenge is the growing illiteracy regarding worldviews that characterizes many Western societies. As Loobuyck and Franken note, this lack of words and ideas about life's most fundamental questions has increased significantly in recent decades (Franken/Loobuyck 2011), leaving citizens without the interpretive resources to engage meaningfully with diverse perspectives. This illiteracy goes further than mere factual knowledge about religions and worldviews but encompasses broader questions of meaning and value. A certain amount of religious competence and literacy among citizens is a desideratum in democracies. Such literacy enables citizens to understand the ideological backgrounds of social and political behavior, detect misunderstandings of religions and worldviews, and recognize the positive contributions that religious traditions and other worldviews can make to democratic processes.

This 'worldview illiteracy' is symptomatic of a broader spiritual crisis that affects democratic societies. Young people particularly face what can be described

as “the complex society,” that is characterized by overwhelming information, increasing diversity, excessive choice options, and boundless freedom. Meanwhile, meaningful frameworks are disappearing (Heijstek-Hofman et al. 2020, 750). The vacuum created by the collapse of traditional meaning-making structures has left many citizens disoriented and vulnerable to existential anxieties and, thus, political manipulations. Without robust frameworks for interpreting experience and constructing meaning, individuals struggle alone in navigating contemporary life’s moral and existential complexities.

This existential disorientation manifests itself in concerning mental health trends, including widespread burnout and anxiety. Dutch research indicates that young people experience significant stress from information overload, choice paralysis, and pressure to construct perfect lives. The “choice stress” documented by Dopmeijer et al. (2022) reveals how freedom without meaningful frameworks creates a burden rather than liberation. This finding has profound implications for democratic societies that are dependent on citizens’ capacity for responsible decision-making.

The social consequences of this crisis of meaning are equally troubling. Despite – or perhaps because of – unprecedented diversity and interconnection, democratic societies face resurgent intolerance, racism, and antisemitism. Research by Hutsebaut and colleagues found that (rising) literal belief styles – both religious and non-religious – correlate positively with exclusivism, intolerance, and racism (Duriez/Hutsebaut 2000; Pollefeyt 1999). These findings suggest that democracy’s crisis includes political polarization and more profound issues of how citizens interpret differences and construct meaning in a pluralistic world.

Democracy’s challenges are further complicated by the ‘post-truth’ environment that characterizes contemporary public discourse and social media. In this context, facts are subordinated to emotional appeals and tribal affiliations, while the shared epistemic frameworks that are essential for democratic deliberation erode. Citizens increasingly inhabit separate information ecosystems shaped by algorithmic personalization and confirmation bias. This fragmentation makes the shared reality that is necessary for democratic functioning increasingly challenging to sustain.

Paradoxically, religion is often perceived as contributing to these democratic challenges rather than alleviating them. Historical and contemporary conflicts that are linked to religious differences reinforce perceptions that religion fuels division rather than cohesion. The negative involvement of religious factors in conflicts from Northern Ireland, Ukraine, and the Middle East has cemented an association between religious identity and violent confrontation in the public consciousness.

Meanwhile, the portrayal of religion as antagonistic to critical thinking persists despite the sophisticated intellectual traditions that can be found within

many religious faiths. The perception that religion demands unquestioning acceptance of dogmatic claims contradicts the critical engagement that is essential for democratic citizenship.

Internal religious crises have further complicated religion's relationship with democracy. Sexual abuse and financial scandals within religious institutions have undermined their moral authority. These failures have fostered cynicism about religious contributions to public life. These scandals exemplify both individual and institutional failures, raising questions about accountability, transparency, and power – issues that are central to the broader functioning of democracy.

These multiple pressures on democracy – worldview illiteracy, spiritual crisis, mental health challenges, intolerance, polarization, and post-truth discourse – along with ambivalence about religion's role, create the context for our inquiry into citizenship education and its relationship to religious formation. The question before us is whether conventional approaches to citizenship education adequately address these deep challenges or whether alternative resources might be necessary for democracy's renewal.

3. Citizenship Education as the Proposed Solution

Citizenship education has emerged in recent years as a notable contemporary response to the challenges facing Western democratic societies (sometimes even as an alternative to religious education). Conventional citizenship education is the deliberate provision of information, education, and development activities to equip and empower students to play an effective role as citizens within their communities, nations and the broader global context. Though varying in implementation across national contexts, citizenship education generally refers to curricula that develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary for active participation in a democratic society (Heijstek-Hofman et al. 2020). Most citizenship education frameworks articulate three core domains: participation, identity, and democracy, with participation functioning as its overarching purpose and connecting the other domains (Bron/Veugelers/van Vliet 2009). These national approaches align with broader European initiatives such as the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (2018), which identifies twenty competences across four areas: values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge necessary for democratic citizenship. While providing a comprehensive framework, the European model emphasizes intercultural competence more than many national curricula, reflecting the continent's growing diversity and challenges to democratic cohesion.

More concretely, citizenship education's objectives typically encompass several didactical dimensions. First, it aims to develop knowledge of democratic

institutions, constitutional principles, and civic processes. Second, it seeks to foster critical thinking skills for informed public discourse participation. Third, it intends to cultivate democratic dispositions such as tolerance, respect for human rights, and commitment to the common good. Finally, it endeavours to promote active engagement in civil society through service learning, deliberative practices, and community involvement (Biesta 2020).

Proponents of citizenship education argue that these educational interventions address democracy's deficits by developing the civic competencies that are lacking in traditional educational models or that have eroded over time through the processes that we described at the outset. By explicitly teaching democratic principles and practices, citizenship education aims to counteract political apathy, enhance critical media literacy, and revitalize democratic participation. As McLaughlin (2006) argues, a 'maximalist' interpretation of citizenship education is characterized by an emphasis on active learning and inclusion. It is interactive, value-based, and process-led, allowing students to develop and articulate their own opinions while engaging in dialogue. This approach presumes that democratic citizenship requires explicit cultivation rather than emerging naturally from general education.

A defining characteristic of mainstream citizenship education approaches is their commitment to so-called neutrality regarding comprehensive worldviews, particularly religious perspectives. This neutrality manifests itself in several ways. First, citizenship education typically emphasizes universal civic values that are supposedly accessible through rational deliberation rather than derived from particular traditions. Second, it often focuses on the procedural aspects of democracy rather than substantive, content-oriented conceptions of the good life. Third, it generally presents a secularized understanding of citizenship that brackets religious identities as private matters separate from public roles.

This preference for neutrality stems from several considerations. Religious neutrality ostensibly provides a common ground that transcends particular worldviews in increasingly diverse societies. The Dutch government's approach to public education exemplifies this perspective by adopting "an active neutral attitude" and by arguing that "all forms of confessional worldview education should take place outside of public education" (Heijstek-Hofman et al. 2020). This position presumes that citizenship education must occupy a 'neutral' space where all students can engage as equals regardless of religious background.

Moreover, the emphasis on neutrality reflects concerns about religion's role in democratic challenges. As described in our first paragraph, religious differences have historically served as flashpoints for conflict, from sectarian violence to culture wars over moral legislation. The literal belief styles prevalent in many religious communities correlate with exclusivism and intolerance (Duriez/Hutsebaut 2000), raising concerns about religion's compatibility with pluralistic democracy. Religious institutions have sometimes resisted democratic reforms

or endorsed authoritarian regimes, reinforcing perceptions that religion often stands in tension with democratic values and human rights.

The neutrality paradigm also addresses epistemological concerns about claims of religious knowledge. Democratic deliberation requires shared evidentiary standards and mutual accountability in reasoning. Religious appeals to revelation or tradition may seem to bypass these requirements by invoking authorities inaccessible to those outside the tradition. Citizenship education's emphasis on rational discourse and evidence-based argumentation thus aims to establish procedural norms for public reasons that transcend particularistic worldviews (Franken/Loobuyck 2011).

This neutral approach is reflected in curricular frameworks that consciously separate citizenship education from religious or worldview education. Civic competencies are primarily conceptualized in terms of knowledge of political institutions, critical thinking skills, and tolerance dispositions. Values education occurs within a "minimal ethics" framework focused on procedural norms rather than comprehensive visions of human flourishing. Religious literacy, when included, typically emphasizes factual and comparative knowledge about diverse traditions rather than engagement with their substantive claims or spiritual practices.

The preference for neutrality appears particularly justified given the growing superdiversity that characterizes contemporary Western societies. As De Groot (2018) observes, globalization and migration have created pluriform, flexible societies where pupils increasingly encounter those with fundamentally different values and worldviews. In this context, citizenship education seeks to establish common ground through universal principles that transcend cultural or religious identities. Neutrality thus represents not an absence of values, but a procedural framework intended to facilitate peaceful coexistence amid divergent comprehensive doctrines.

Given religion's complex relationship with democracy's challenges, a neutral approach to citizenship education appears reasonable at first glance. If literal religious belief styles correlate with intolerance, as Hutsebaut's research suggests (2020), then bracketing such commitments in favour of rational deliberation about shared civic values seems prudent. If religious differences have historically fueled conflict, then establishing a neutral civic space is necessary for peaceful coexistence. From this perspective, the secular, rational, and knowledge-based approach to citizenship education represents a comprehensible response to the democratic challenges outlined in the previous section.

4. The Limitations of Conventional Citizenship Education

Despite its aspirations, citizenship education often fails to address adequately the democratic challenges it seeks to resolve. This educational approach emphasizes the development of civic knowledge, democratic skills, and pluralist attitudes

that, in theory, enable students to participate meaningfully in democracy. However, several fundamental limitations hinder its effectiveness in tackling the deeper challenges of democracy.

Perhaps the most significant limitation is citizenship education's over-reliance on formal, abstract concepts divorced from lived experience. Biesta (2020) argues that citizenship education frequently presents democracy as a set of abstract principles and procedures rather than an embodied practice. This abstraction creates a problematic disconnect between citizenship as taught and citizenship as lived. This gap between abstract democratic principles and concrete experience often produces resistance and cynicism rather than engagement. When democracy appears exclusively in distant government institutions rather than everyday interactions, students struggle to perceive its relevance to their immediate concerns.

This abstraction problem relates directly to citizenship education's often inadequate engagement with the existential and meaning-making dimensions of human experience. As Heijstek-Hofman et al. (2020, 751) observe, "young people need time and space to develop their own identity through thinking about values, norms, and motives. They also need this to reflect on what gives meaning and direction to life." Yet conventional citizenship education typically bypasses these more profound and personal questions, focusing instead on procedural knowledge and skills. This neglect of existential questions leaves unaddressed what Nussbaum (2024) characterizes as a crisis where education has become predominantly oriented toward economic and civic utility rather than incarnated human flourishing. Without engaging in these meaning-making dimensions, citizenship education fails to equip students with the existential resources that are necessary for navigating the daily moral complexities of contemporary life.

The claims of neutrality in conventional citizenship education constitute a third significant limitation. While citizenship education is ideologically neutral, this neutrality merely masks particular normative commitments. It is as if giving preference to a secular vision, where no specific religions are taught, is more neutral than attending to different cultures, religions, and worldviews. However, it isn't. The pretence of neutrality obscures how citizenship education often privileges certain conceptions of citizenship – typically liberal individualist models that are focused on rights and legal status – over alternatives that emphasize communal responsibility or social transformation (or sometimes vice versa). This hidden normativity prevents students from recognizing and evaluating the assumptions that underlie different conceptions of citizenship, thus limiting their capacity to envision alternative democratic arrangements.

A fourth limitation concerns citizenship education's insufficient motivational power to inspire civic engagement. Democracy requires more than informed citizens; it needs citizens who care about democratic values and feel motivated to participate in collective governance and promote the common good. Bellah

et al. (1985) document how religious commitments historically provided motivational resources for civic engagement in American society, suggesting that purely rational approaches to citizenship often lack the emotional and motivational resources that religious narratives offer. Research by Mutz (2006) reinforces this point: cognitive understanding of political issues alone does not predict civic participation. Instead, emotional engagement with political questions and social connections to politically active communities are more likely to generate sustained civic involvement.

The individualist assumptions underlying much of citizenship education represent a fifth limitation. Conventional approaches often implicitly assume that democracy functions primarily by aggregating individual knowledge and preferences, while neglecting its fundamentally relational and collective nature. This individualism underestimates the importance of friendship, love, and solidarity in sustaining democratic communities. Citizenship education that overlooks these relational dimensions fails to develop the collaborative capacities that are necessary for collective self-governance. Democracy depends on what individual citizens know and their ability to create knowledge through dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative inquiry. Barber (1984) has called this “strong democratic talk” – communication that bridges differences, explores shared concerns, and constructs common purposes.

A sixth limitation concerns citizenship education’s reliance on rationalistic approaches that neglect narrative dimensions of human understanding. Conventional citizenship education typically employs analytical frameworks that privilege abstract reasoning over narrative engagement. Yet research demonstrates that narrative plays a crucial role in how humans construct meaning and identity. McAdams (2001) observes that when a person is asked who he or she is, this is always expressed in a story. Bruner (1990) emphasizes that narrative provides not just structure but meaning: through stories, we make sense of experience in ways that mere information cannot achieve. Without narrative resources, citizenship education lacks the tools to help students integrate civic knowledge into meaningful life stories that motivate engagement.

A seventh limitation concerns citizenship education’s failure to provide substantive moral frameworks. Critics like MacIntyre (1981) have long argued that moral formation requires rootedness in particular traditions rather than abstract universal principles. His work challenges the notion that moral reasoning can occur outside specific moral traditions, suggesting that citizenship virtues require substantive moral frameworks. Sandel (1998) similarly contends that liberal neutrality’s ‘unencumbered self’ lacks the moral depth necessary for meaningful civic engagement. Young people face what Bauman (2000) characterizes as ‘liquid modernity,’ that is, a lack of moral frameworks for navigating boundless freedom. Citizenship education that focuses on procedural values without engaging in substantive moral traditions fails to address this fundamental need.

This argument requires careful nuance, as meaningful moral frameworks certainly exist outside religious traditions. Empirical research frequently shows minimal differences in core moral values between religious and non-religious individuals. However, religious traditions provide distinctive contextual frameworks for moral reasoning – embedding ethical principles within interpretive communities, historical narratives, and motivational structures that give moral imperatives their force and meaning. The issue is not whether only religious traditions can provide moral guidance, but rather how citizenship education can engage with the depth and complexity of moral formation that religious traditions exemplify, whether through religious or secular frameworks.

An eighth limitation involves citizenship education's presentation of democracy as a static system rather than an evolving historical project. Knowledge-based approaches often present existing institutional arrangements as the definitive realization of democracy rather than as particular historical compromises. This static presentation fails to prepare students for their own role in democracy's ongoing renewal and transformation. As Mouffe (2005) argues, democracy is never a finished achievement but rather a continual process of contestation that must adapt to changing conditions. Unger (1998) similarly emphasizes democracy's creative dimension – the capacity to imagine alternative arrangements and experiment with new forms of collective governance. Citizenship education that presents democracy as finished rather than unfolding fails to develop the institutional imagination necessary for adapting democratic practices to changing conditions. It can even stifle such imagination.

Perhaps most fundamentally, conventional citizenship education positions students as passive recipients of information rather than active agents in democratic life. This passive stance contradicts democracy's essence, which depends on citizens' capacity for initiative, voice, and collective action. Freire's (1970) analysis of 'banking education' (chapter 2) points out that treating students as depositories of information rather than active co-creators of knowledge undermines their sense of agency. European educational research demonstrates similar tensions between abstract citizenship frameworks and classroom implementation. Jackson's work (2014) for the Council of Europe highlights how teachers across Europe struggle to translate citizenship frameworks into meaningful pedagogical encounters. Political scientist Ostrom's (1990) research demonstrates that a sense of agency is crucial for sustainable democratic participation. Without understanding political efficacy, citizens withdraw from public life regardless of how much they know about democratic institutions. This passivity particularly disadvantages students from marginalized communities who may already doubt their legitimate place in democratic life.

Finally, citizenship education often fails to engage with religious and philosophical traditions' language and conceptual resources. Habermas (2008) acknowledges

that religions are influential as a source of meaning, significance, and the interpretation of life. Aldridge argues that understanding religion requires more than theoretical comprehension or intellectual engagement; it necessitates practical engagement with religious concepts and values that significantly contrast with purely objective or scientific inquiry (2018). Without engaging in these traditions, citizenship education lacks the resources needed to address the profound questions of meaning that underlie democratic commitment.

These limitations help explain why conventional approaches to citizenship education often fail to adequately address the democratic challenges identified at the beginning of this article. Knowledge-based citizenship education neither provides the existential resources necessary for navigating crises of meaning nor develops the narrative capacities essential for identity formation. Its claims of neutrality mask particular normative commitments while its individualistic focus neglects democracy's relational nature. Its rationalistic approaches bypass the narrative dimensions of human understanding, while its static presentation of democracy fails to engage students' creative agency. Without addressing these fundamental limitations, citizenship education will likely continue to fall short of its aspirations to revitalize democratic life; on the contrary, they might even contribute to the democratic deficit.

5. The Potential Contributions of Confessional Religious Education to Democracy

Our argument is that confessional religious education can contribute uniquely to citizenship formation through multiple avenues that address the limitations of conventional citizenship approaches. These insights are reflected in diverse European contexts. For example, Gearon's (2013) analysis of religious education across European settings demonstrates how confessional approaches support identity development while fostering critical engagement with plurality when implemented through interpretive pedagogies. These contributions stem from the narrative structure of religious education, its identity-forming capacities, moral resources, and dialogical methodologies. Analyzing these contributions reveals how religious education can enhance citizenship formation through complementary rather than competing educational aims.

5.1. *Narrative Foundations for Democratic Understanding*

Religious education's narrative approach offers a powerful alternative to the abstract rationalism that limits conventional citizenship education. As narrative theologians like Hauerwas (1983) explain, religious traditions operate primarily through stories instead of principles, with sacred texts understood not as a collection

of doctrinal or theological principles, but as a set of narratives. These narratives provide frameworks for understanding human existence, ethical responsibility, and communal belonging that abstract citizenship principles alone can never supply. Religious education is akin to reading a particular story. Citizenship education often assumes that it can replace the particular story with a summary or abstract of its moral message. Students engaging with such specific texts in religious education develop narrative competencies essential for democratic participation.

The narrative dimension of religious education responds directly to what Taylor (1989, 25-52) identifies as a key challenge in modern identity formation – the need for “strong evaluations” that provide orientation toward specific conceptions of the good. Through engagement with religious narratives, students encounter what MacIntyre (1981) terms the “virtues”, character traits valued within communities of practice that extend beyond abstract procedural norms. By providing these narrative resources, religious education helps students integrate civic knowledge into warm and meaningful life stories that motivate engaged citizenship.

Religious narratives can also contribute to democratic formation through their ability to connect personal experiences to broader social meanings, including ecological responsibility and care for creation. Religious education fosters identity development by offering narrative frameworks for students to locate their own experiences. This process addresses what Biesta (2020, 2) describes as “subjectification,” becoming a subject in one’s existence rather than merely an object of social forces. Through this narrative engagement, students develop what Streib calls ‘fictionality’ – “the ability to realize the ‘it-could-be-otherwise’ and to play imaginatively with alternatives” (1997, 50). This imaginative capacity is essential for democratic renewal, allowing citizens to envision alternatives to existing social arrangements.

The narrative dimension of religious education also provides powerful resources for addressing social division. As Frei (1997) emphasizes, religious narratives create communities of interpretation where diverse individuals find common meaning despite their differences. This communal dimension addresses the lack of “communities of memory” that sustain civic commitment across time, identified by Bellah (1985, 152) as a critical deficit in individualistic societies. Religious education creates spaces where students practice what Cooling calls “living in the light of a story” – a “creative process [that] demands the development of interpretative skills” (2000, 161) transferable to democratic contexts.

5.2. Religious Education and Identity Formation

Religious education can also contribute substantially to the identity formation essential for democratic citizenship. Heijstek-Hofman et al. (2020) emphasize

that by having young people explore and answer life questions, they reflect on their answers and beliefs, including those of others, thus becoming aware of their own norms, values, and worldviews (2020). This self-awareness is crucial for responsible citizenship because, as Biesta (2020) contends, all education should aim to enable, motivate, and support young people to lead their lives maturely and responsibly.

Religious education provides uniquely powerful resources for identity formation because it engages with existential questions that conventional citizenship education often neglects. Van der Kooij (2016) observes that religions function as “sources of meaning-giving” by providing frameworks for answering fundamental questions: “What gives life meaning? What is life’s purpose? Why do I do what I do? What do I find important?” (2016, 35). By engaging with these questions, religious education helps students to develop what van Dijk (2017) calls a “moral compass that gives direction and meaning to life.” This dimension addresses the existential vacuum many democratic societies face – the loss of meaning frameworks that leave young people vulnerable to nihilism, extremism, or uncritical consumption.

The identity formation fostered through religious education can offer democratic capital, given its potential to develop what Miedema (2009) calls a personal but open identity, rather than closed or totalizing identities that fuel social division. In contrast to both relativistic and fundamentalist approaches, religious education can cultivate a “second naivety” (Ricoeur 1971) – a reflective, post-critical faith that has engaged seriously and critically with plurality. This mature approach to tradition and worldviews balances commitment and openness, developing precisely the capacities for reflective engagement that democracy requires of citizens who hold convictions without dogmatism and engage with difference without relativism.

Religious education can also develop several competencies that are essential for democratic citizenship. First, it fosters hermeneutical skills – the ability to interpret texts, symbols, and social realities with sensitivity to context and perspective. Lombaerts (2000) explains that this interpretive approach considers context, multiple perspectives, and pre-understandings, fosters critical thinking, and mitigates bias and prejudices. These interpretive skills are increasingly crucial in democratic societies where citizens must navigate complex information ecosystems and evaluate competing truth claims in what we describe as a ‘post-truth’ environment.

Research by Hutsebaut and colleagues provides empirical support for the connection between religious identity styles and democratic values. Their extensive research demonstrates that symbolic styles of belief (in contrast to literal belief styles) – both believing (post-critical belief) and non-believing (relativism) – tend to view reality in a more nuanced way and have been shown to inhibit

intolerance and racism (Duriez/Hutsebaut 2000). These findings suggest that the type of reflective religious identity fostered through well-designed religious education contributes positively to the democratic values of tolerance and mutual respect.

5.3. *Religious Education's Moral Resources for Democracy*

Religious education provides moral resources that enhance citizenship through several distinctive contributions. First, it offers substantive conceptions of the common good that move beyond thin procedural accounts of democratic values. Various religious traditions emphasize human dignity, solidarity, care for vulnerable members of society, and stewardship of the earth as sacred obligations. These substantive moral frameworks provide what Thiessen (2002, 47-48) calls “thick” conceptions of the good that is necessary for civic formation. Indeed, Arthur (2003) argues that citizenship education requires knowledge of civic responsibilities and moral motivation to act upon these (2003, 91). Religious traditions provide precisely this moral motivation through narratives that connect individual actions to larger purposes.

This argument presupposes a model of a democratic society where religious and secular moral frameworks can coexist and mutually inform public deliberation without establishing religious authority in civic governance. While acknowledging the legitimate separation of religious institutions from state power, this approach recognizes religion's distinctive contribution to moral motivation and emotional engagement. Religious narratives provide not just alternative moral content but distinctive patterns of moral reasoning and motivational structures that inspire action beyond rational self-interest. This contribution remains valuable even in pluralistic societies where many citizens derive moral frameworks from non-religious sources, as the democratic challenge involves not just identifying shared values but cultivating the motivation to act upon them.

Second, religious education cultivates what Nussbaum (2024, 31) calls “political emotions” – feelings of solidarity, indignation at injustice, and care for the common good that motivate democratic engagement. Religious narratives often generate powerful emotional responses through stories of suffering, redemption, and transformation. These narratives provide “substantive metaphysical commitments” (Poplin 2014, chapter 5) that have historically fueled significant social justice movements. Unlike purely rational approaches to citizenship that frequently lack motivational force, religious education engages emotions and imaginations in ways that inspire civic commitment.

Third, religious education provides resources for hope and resilience that are essential for sustained democratic engagement. Through engagement with

religious accounts of hope amid suffering, students develop perspectives on maintaining commitment through adversity. This hopeful orientation addresses what Bellah et al. (1985) identify as a critical challenge for democracy – maintaining civic commitment through periods of disappointment, setback, and slow progress. As Habermas (2008) acknowledges, religions provide an influential function as a source of meaning, significance, and interpretation of life that secular frameworks often struggle to generate.

5.4. *Religious Education and Inter-worldview Dialogue*

Religious education contributes significantly to democratic dialogue by emphasizing engagement across profound differences. Religious education practices hospitality as a key principle that involves making space to receive others while also being willing to be guests. Through this reciprocal exchange, students learn the “fragility of interreligious encounters” – the challenges and possibilities of genuine dialogue across difference (Moyaert 2011).

The interreligious dialogue fostered through religious education develops ‘civic virtues,’ essential for democratic deliberation (Skeie 2006). These include listening empathetically, engaging respectfully with different perspectives, and searching for common ground amid disagreement. As Miedema argues, through religious education, “students already in the embryonic society of the school experience or are confronted by and should become acquainted with other children’s religious backgrounds, ideas, experiences and practices” (2008, 116). This early exposure to different worldviews cultivates “interpretive competences” that help students navigate pluralism in civic contexts (Jackson 2004).

Religious education’s contribution to democratic dialogue is particularly valuable because it engages with substantive differences rather than bracketing them out. As Hollenbach (2002, 159) argues, authentic engagement with diversity requires “communities of memory and formation” rather than detached analysis, which proves especially valuable when addressing shared ecological challenges that transcend cultural and religious boundaries. Religious education creates spaces where students practice “acknowledged positionality” – engagement from particular perspectives rather than feigned neutrality (Cooling 2010, 8-9). In fact, Cooling’s research reveals that this approach may be more conducive to authentic learning than claimed neutrality because it models honest engagement with difference while respecting diverse perspectives.

This contribution to dialogue is exemplified in Flemish religious education’s ‘inter-worldview dialogue’ approach (see www.ilcild.be). Such an approach ensures that respect for one’s own religious or worldview identity is combined with a genuine interest in and openness to others, creating conditions for meaningful democratic deliberation across differences. This dialogical approach

addresses various domains that are essential for citizenship: democracy, sustainability, diversity and identity, dialogue, participation, and co-existence. By engaging these domains through dialogue on fundamental worldview questions, religious education provides a substantive contribution to democratic citizenship that purely procedural approaches cannot match (Pollefeyt 2023).

6. Why a Hermeneutical and Communicative Approach to Religious Education Is Necessary

The challenges facing democracy and the limitations of conventional citizenship education point toward the need for a specific approach to religious education that can effectively harness its potential contributions outlined in this article. The hermeneutical-communicative model of religious education that we have developed over the past twenty years (Pollefeyt 2004) offers precisely such an approach, providing a methodological framework that addresses democratic challenges through its distinctive pedagogical principles and practices.

The hermeneutical-communicative approach conceptualizes religious education as a dialogical process involving the interpretation of three interconnected dimensions: the student's own existence, religious tradition(s), and contemporary society. This approach moves beyond dogmatic transmission models that prioritize tradition over student experience, and at the same time, purely experiential models that privilege individual subjectivity over tradition. Instead, it establishes a dynamic interplay between text (tradition), context (society), and interpreter (student), creating a 'hermeneutical circle' where meaning emerges through ongoing interpretive dialogue. As Mettepenningen (2019) argues, "it is precisely in the integral dynamics of these three perspectives [tradition, student, and plurality] that the fruitfulness, and thus the normativity of the [hermeneutical-communicative] curriculum lies". This integration addresses the democratic challenge of navigating between rootless cosmopolitanism and closed particularism that was identified at the beginning of this article.¹ This approach finds parallels in other European educational contexts. Grimmitt's (2010) research in the UK context similarly emphasizes how religiously literate citizenship education contributes to social cohesion through interpretive engagement rather than mere factual knowledge.

This approach is anchored in a specific theological anthropology that views the human person as 'made in the image of God' and (therefore) as 'fragile

¹ The Flemish curriculum for Catholic religious education is based on this approach (www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/leerplan-secundair/), and the Thomas website of KU Leuven supports its practical implementation (<https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/>).

hermeneutical space' – characterized by radical openness to reality, essential indeterminateness, and an inherent capacity to transcend one's own reality (see: Pollefeyt 2020). This anthropological understanding directly shapes the educational methodology by recognizing students' innate capacity for receiving and interpreting meaning. From this perspective, human dignity emerges from fixed certainties and the openness to engage with transcendence and plurality. Religious education thus becomes a practice of recognizing and cultivating the hermeneutical space within each person – a space where democratic engagement across differences becomes possible precisely because the human person is fundamentally constituted by relationality and interpretive openness. Central to this approach is its commitment to taking diverse interpretive perspectives seriously. Hermeneutical learning begins with recognizing that every reality is already interpreted and seeks to examine the factors that shape these interpretations, including presuppositions and truth claims, experiences, narratives, symbols, and hopes. This interpretive awareness addresses the democratic challenge of worldview illiteracy, developing students' capacity to recognize their own and others' interpretive frameworks rather than assuming a neutral view from nowhere that masks particular perspectives.

The hermeneutical-communicative approach positions the teacher in the 'SWIM-function' – the educator is at once a specialist (S), witness (WI), and moderator (M). As a specialist, the teacher possesses sufficient knowledge of diverse traditions to facilitate informed dialogue. As a witness, the teacher speaks authentically from within a particular hermeneutical tradition, modeling engaged but reflective commitment. As a moderator, the teacher navigates 'hermeneutical intersections' (or: 'conflicts of interpretations') – moments in the classroom when diverse interpretations meet, overlap, but also dissonate and clash, and require negotiation. This multifaceted role addresses the limitations of both the supposedly neutral teacher who conceals personal commitments and the dogmatic teacher who forecloses genuine dialogue.

The hermeneutical-communicative approach creates educational spaces that are characterized by 'religious hospitality' that make space within oneself to receive the other while also being willing to enter the hermeneutical space of the other as a guest. This hospitality draws on religious traditions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, that regard welcoming the stranger as a sacred obligation. The dynamic of 'crossing over and entering the hermeneutical space of the other, not as a participant but as a guest' begins the process. This is followed by 'coming back (home)... transformed and enriched to one's own hermeneutical space' (Pollefeyt 2013), which cultivates precisely the democratic capacity that Arendt calls an 'enlarged mentality' (Arendt 1982, 43).

This approach directly counters the false dichotomy between identity and diversity that undermines democratic discourse. The hermeneutical-communicative model demonstrates that openness and identity are not mutually exclusive

but rather reciprocally enriching. A secure identity provides the foundation for genuine openness, while openness prevents identity from hardening into fundamentalism. It balances commitment and openness, while developing precisely the capacities for reflective engagement that democracy requires of citizens who hold convictions without dogmatism and engage with difference without relativism.

Crucially, the hermeneutical-communicative approach recognizes the plurality of interpretations *within* religious traditions. It acknowledges the internal diversity of traditions, teaching students to recognize how interpretations are contested and negotiated even within a single faith tradition. This approach counters fundamentalism and black-and-white thinking by revealing how traditions contain interpretive plurality. Recognizing the internal diversity of traditions instills nuance, combats stereotypical thinking, and promotes tolerance. These capacities directly address polarization and digital tribalism that threaten contemporary democracies.

The model's emphasis on communication addresses what we have identified as democracy's relational deficit. Through structured dialogue about existential questions, students develop what Barber (1984) calls "strong democratic talk" – communication that bridges differences, explores shared concerns, and constructs common purposes. They practice articulating their own perspectives, listening to others, questioning presuppositions, and seeking mutual understanding – skills essential for democratic deliberation. Communication skills acquired from discussing religion are transferable to engaging with pluralism in the public sphere, making religious education a laboratory for democratic dialogue.

The hermeneutical-communicative approach also addresses the moral vacuum that many young people face by engaging students with substantial moral traditions but without imposing predetermined conclusions. Unlike counterproductive mono-correlative approaches that establish forced one-to-one relationships between experience and tradition, this model creates 'multi-correlation' – a rich hermeneutical field where students encounter diverse interpretive possibilities (Pollefeyt 2004). This approach respects students' agency and warm engagement while providing moral resources that purely procedural approaches lack, addressing the motivational deficit of conventional citizenship education.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the hermeneutical-communicative model is the fostering of Hutsebaut's 'symbolic belief styles', which are associated with tolerance and openness. By encouraging reflective engagement with tradition rather than either uncritical acceptance or wholesale rejection, this approach cultivates what Duriez and Hutsebaut (2000) call, building upon Ricoeur, 'post-critical belief' – a faith stance that acknowledges both the transcendent dimensions of human life and religious claims and the inevitably interpreted nature of all human understanding. This reflective faith correlates negatively with measures of racism, authoritarianism, intolerance, and polarization.

The Catholic Dialogue School exemplifies how this hermeneutical-communicative model can be institutionalized at the school level. Boeve (2025) argues that this model integrates a robust Catholic identity with genuine openness to diversity and plurality while emphasizing dialogue as intrinsic to Catholicism and Christianity. Engaging students through multiple perspectives – the Christian tradition, their own identity, and contemporary pluralism – helps them to understand broader socio-cultural debates, attitudes, and presuppositions, as well as forming a personal, engaged, and informed position. This balanced approach addresses the democratic need for citizens who combine a secure identity with open engagement across differences.

In conclusion, while a hermeneutical-communicative approach to religious education does not provide a silver bullet for democracy's challenges, it offers a framework for democratic renewal through religious education.² By developing interpretive awareness, fostering reflective commitment, practising hospitality across difference, engaging with moral traditions, and cultivating dialogical skills, this approach attends to democracy's more fundamental need for citizens who are capable of navigating plurality while maintaining commitment, and who engage across differences while preserving distinctiveness and participating in ongoing deliberation about the common good. As democracies face unprecedented challenges from polarization, populism, and post-truth discourse, a hermeneutical-communicative approach provides educational resources for cultivating democratic virtues, competencies, and commitments necessary for democracy's flourishing.

7. Conclusion

This article traces the intricate relationship between democracy, citizenship education, and religious education to argue that a hermeneutical-communicative approach to confessional religious education offers vital resources for democratic renewal. We begin by examining how contemporary democracies face multifaceted challenges, including worldview illiteracy, spiritual crisis, and increasing polarization – challenges that conventional citizenship education attempts to address through 'neutral', knowledge-based approaches. However, as we demonstrate,

² In our empirical research, utilizing the Post-Critical Belief Scale with over 30,000 Flemish pupils, we substantiate the theoretical analysis developed in this contribution by demonstrating that the hermeneutical-communicative model of religious education positively contributes to democratic formation by fostering symbolic styles of thinking in students. The data reveal that students exposed to this approach increasingly adopt post-critical belief and an awareness of contingency (relativism), both symbolic cognitive styles, associated with greater tolerance and openness to diversity. This suggests that religious education can indeed serve as a laboratory for developing the interpretive competences vital for democratic citizenship (see Pollefeyt/Hendrickx 2025).

these approaches frequently fall short due to their abstraction from lived experience, neglect of existential dimensions, and insufficient motivational resources. Confessional religious education, we argue, overcomes these limitations through its narrative foundations, identity-forming capacities, moral resources, and dialogical practices – contributions that enhance rather than hinder democratic citizenship. A hermeneutical-communicative model of religious education offers a pedagogical framework that balances adherence to a particular tradition with pluralistic engagement, developing students' capacity to interpret diverse perspectives, engage in meaningful dialogue across differences, and form reflective commitments that resist dogmatism and relativism. In our increasingly divided world, this approach provides educational resources for cultivating democratic virtues, competencies, and commitments that are necessary for sustaining pluralistic democracies where citizens can engage across differences while maintaining both distinctiveness and solidarity.

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