

**Toke Elshof**  
**Tilburg School of Catholic Theology**  
[a.j.m.elshof@uvt.nl](mailto:a.j.m.elshof@uvt.nl)  
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## **Catholic schools and Catholic Social Teaching: a contribution to social life in the Netherlands**

### Abstract

At first glance the relation between catholic schools and the catholic church seems only superficial. Their decreasing engagement seems to provide evidence for the theory of the decline of religion in social life. On second thoughts however, catholic schools are connected with the catholic religious tradition in a very special way. This article draws from intergenerational practical-theological research into family life and describes the catholic religiosity as an embodied religiosity with a focus on contributing to social life. As a consequence, catholic religiosity mainly comes to expression in activities and practices which are connected with the catholic religion in an implicit and unrecognizable way. Nevertheless, these practices are religion-founded; this embodied religiosity even bares traces of ecclesiastical documents. The results of this family research provide a new perspective on the assumption that the relation between catholic schools and the catholic religion is only superficial. The article postulates that the main themes of Catholic Social Teaching play a significant role in catholic school life, and that this Teaching constitutes a challenge to the future of catholic schools.

### 1. School and church: a decreasing engagement

During pillarization, the catholic school was exclusively aimed at roman catholic children and intertwined not only with family life but also with church life. School, parents and parish together gave shape to a catholic educational triangle. Catholic schools taught pupils about the catholic faith and church and led them towards a recognizable catholic way of life. The religious education consisted of catechesis lessons, taught by the parish priest or religious ? in the area. After pillarization and according to the Directorium for Catechesis,<sup>1</sup> religious education has been seen as a school subject that has to be distinguished from catechesis lessons. Therefore the Catholic faith no longer performs an exclusive role in Religious Education. A multi-religious or interreligious perspective has replaced the earlier mono-religious perspective. Furthermore, catholic schools have to deal with the situation that the religious diversity in society, which used to be part of the school's environment, has become part of the school community itself: pupils, teachers, parents and school boards no longer originate from just the catholic population. Moreover, the at the formal and administrative level growing distance between church life and school life is unmistakable. As a result, the recognizability of the catholic identity has declined, which leads to the question in what way these schools can still be identified as catholic schools. The significance of being a catholic school has become a topic of discussion, in society and within catholic school life as well.

## 2. Features of catholic religiosity

This situation points to the remaining significance of the catholic religion for Catholics who are not affiliated (anymore) with the roman catholic faith and church. To that topic, an intergenerational practical-theological research into the development of religiosity within the domestic life of roman catholic families is relevant.<sup>ii</sup> In fact, catholic families also exhibit a decline of affiliation with the catholic church. Catholic families correspond to catholic schools as well in their deliberation of still being catholic or not. These correlations between school life and family life indicate that the results of the family research can elucidate the problem of the identity of catholic schools. The family research characteristic to investigate the shape and meaning of the family religiosity ‘from within’, contributes to a better understanding of the so called ‘lived religion’. This approach can also clarify aspects of the lived religion within the context of catholic schools.

The most notable result of the family investigation concerns the discovery that catholic religiosity is characterized by embodiment and by its focus on the social life and ethical practices. Practicing (churchgoing) and non-practicing Catholics stress that religiosity is not only expressed in a recognizably religious praxis, for example in church commitment, ritual actions or diaconal work. More important are the activities and practices which at first sight do not even seem to be connected to religious matters. Caring for children, enduring engagement with suffering neighbors, preparing food or maintaining contact with refugees are examples of activities which are not immediately recognizable as religious ones.<sup>iii</sup> Nevertheless, they can be religion-founded or inspired.<sup>iv</sup> Practicing and non-practicing Catholics emphasize the main importance of this ‘lived’ religiosity and as a consequence, embodiment with a focus on ethics and social life can be regarded as main characteristics of catholic religiosity. Catholic ‘lived’ religiosity can be expressed explicitly but often gets shape and meaning in practices which are connected to religion in an implicit or unconscious way. Support for the hypothesis that these results provide insight into catholic school life comes from an investigation of the identity of Christian schools in the Netherlands by Anneke de Wolff<sup>v</sup>. Firstly, she distinguishes four domains of religious identity (the religious domain, the pedagogical domain, the educational/curricular domain and the organizational domain)<sup>vi</sup>. She describes relevant literature of authors who, irrespective of their conception of identity, underline the fact that the identity of a Christian school (or the Christian World view) provides the school with a framework of commitments and values that are relevant to the pedagogical, the educational/curricular and the organizational aspects of the school. Actually, De Wolff clarifies that the implicit religiosity which was observed in catholic family life, plays a noticeable role in protestant school life as well. Secondly, her observation of a fifth domain is significant, especially because this concerns the social domain which is developed in the school’s vision of the relevance of education for society. Remarkably, De Wolff seems to perceive this dimension only in catholic education: it is the Dutch Catholic School Board that distinguishes this dimension.<sup>vii</sup> This suggests that attention to this dimension is a characteristic of catholic education.<sup>viii</sup> The emphasis on the social dimension may be ‘Typically Catholic’. Insights from catholic schools reinforce the impression that the focus towards society is more or less sacred within catholic education, not only in their mission statements (formal identity) but also in what parents, teachers and school managers consider highly important (lived identity). Catholic schools are strongly focused on an education contributing to society and to the *bonum commune*. In fact this fifth domain can be regarded as a comprehensive framework and a background against which the other four domains become meaningful. The conclusion must be drawn that catholic schools, in their emphasis on ethics and social life, demonstrate a religiosity that is similar to the religiosity perceived in catholic family life.

The second result of the family research mentioned above, applies to the correlation between domestic life and theological views expressed in ecclesiastical documents. The religiosity in family life bears traces of the church view. The reflections of grandparents for instance on marriage and sexuality, exhibit a shift in meaning, connected to the changed insights concerning marriage and sexuality promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.<sup>ix</sup> And the attitude of parents for example on upbringing and social commitment are closely related to the church view on that subject, for example expressed in *Familiaris Consortio* in the 1980s. This correlation in family life leads to the question whether ecclesiastical insights have an influence on catholic school life as well.

### 3. The Catholic Social Teaching

Further reflections on everyday school life clarify that the religious identity permeates the pedagogical, the educational and the organizational domains.<sup>x</sup> Within the pedagogical dimension, religious identity takes shape in the view on education, in the pedagogical climate and in the mutual behavior between teachers and pupils. This dimension refers to the community which is the school itself. Catholic schools regard this dimension as very important. Education should serve the pupils and foster them as complete persons. It is relatively undisputed that pupils should learn maths, languages, and geography, but also how to interact with each other in a respectful way, which values are worth striving for and that religiosity is of value. Catholic schools consider themselves as pedagogical communities that embody certain values, such as solidarity, responsibility, forgiveness, justice and care. In this, catholic schools refer to a vision of mankind which focuses on human dignity and the uniqueness of each child, including weaker students. They also refer to the dialogical or relational character of humanity. The roots of these values, however, are closely connected to the catholic religion. Within the educational dimension, religiosity is expressed in the educational learning goals and choices. These are goals such as: learning to think independently, making choices responsibly, creating a critical involvement in society and church and stimulating the development of pupils in morals, religions and an affinity with the unknown, the ungraspable secret of life. This dimension also includes didactical principles and teaching methods. Choices for didactical approaches aimed at working together, gaining (religious) experiences or pupils developing a personal point of view, can express a religion-connected orientation. The organizational dimension refers to the organization of the school, for example in the contact with parents or religious organizations, in the style of leadership and in the manner in which decisions are made and communicated. In this case, one can think of a respectful approach, clarity and a democratic procedure. However, this dimension is also relevant in the recruitment policy of new pupils, teachers and management. Catholic schools are no longer exclusively for Catholics; this dimension gives insight into a recruitment policy of open acceptance. Being Catholic is not a criterion, an open and respectful attitude towards Catholicism usually is. This requires the development of a vision concerning the meaning of the catholic roots. This dimension is as such a finding place of new religious and philosophical communication. Concerning the social domain, we already mentioned that the focus within catholic schools on contributing to society, expresses a significant feature of catholic religiosity. In line with the practical-theological research mentioned above, this article regards the practices, attitudes and opinions which are considered sacred within catholic education, as examples of an embodied and implicit religiosity. In fact, in the importance given to the social domain (the society surrounding the school) and the pedagogical domain (the society of the school itself) the main issues of the Catholic Social Teaching appear. Catholic schools are connected with the catholic church, not by teaching

*into* the catholic religion or by being an instrument and an extension of the parish life, but by being a location where the main themes of the Social Teaching of the Church are put into practice: in the personalized, relational view on mankind and the vision that education serves the child, in the attention for the bonum commune and the influence of values as justice, solidarity and subsidiarity. Catholicity is embodied in a religious founded value structure. <sup>xi</sup>

#### 4. Two contributions to social life

##### a. Catholic school as a location where interreligious dialogue is put into practice

In catholic educational practice the subject 'Religious Education' is usually connected to the religious pluralism within and outside the school. Because catholic schools are no longer schools exclusively for Catholics, they pay attention to several religious traditions on a regular basis, especially in the subject Religious Education, which is seen as separate from catechesis. <sup>xii</sup> In Religious Education, the Catholic faith no longer performs an assumed leading role. A multi-religious or interreligious perspective has replaced the earlier mono-religious perspective and the earlier more cognitive catechesis approach has made way for more experience-based methods. The religious pluralism within the school presents a challenge for the subject Religious Education and for the formation of the pupils in multicultural and multi-religious dialogue. The preference of the catholic faith does not exclude religious education that teaches *about* and *from* religion, but requires attention for these concepts especially regarding the context of religious pluralism and growing intolerance towards foreigners. Such religious education is related to Catholic Social Teaching because it stimulates and fosters the ability of youngsters to understand religiosity, religious similarities and religious differences. That this is not a contradiction goes back to the confidence of the catholic tradition in the reasonableness of faith and in the importance of searching for truth in freedom. For that, the preference of the catholic faith does not imply that the school does not accept and promote the freedom of religion and world view. Research shows that a combination of an open view on social questions and religious diversity together with a positive attitude towards the contemporary meaning of the catholic tradition, can become the breeding ground for interreligious dialogue. <sup>xiii</sup> In this way, the religious education is challenged to contribute not only to the education of pupils but also to society itself, because catholic schools are challenged to become a location where the religious dialogue that lacks in society is put into practice.

##### b. Catholic school as a location for inspired and inspiring communal life

Several studies indicate that the catholic school is becoming important, also for non-believers. A research from Nijmegen <sup>xiv</sup> observed that teachers, students and parents in catholic education would like having more school celebrations than the ones being held currently. This yearning for liturgy does not only exist in church goers or religiously brought up people, but also in non-church going teachers, students in secondary education and primary school parents. The second example are secondary school students who wish to have a prayer room in the school. In this case as well, the wish is not connected to any measure of church involvement.

An investigation from Louvain <sup>xv</sup> concludes something similar. 70% of the parents in Flemish catholic education state that they are adherents of catholic education, varying from mildly positive to a strongly adherent. Because only 9% of those parents are church goers we see here as well that not going to church does not implicate the irrelevance of catholic education.

To the contrary. It is secularization itself that leads parents to declare that the religious identity should be more apparent. How can we explain this strange paradox?

An insight into this paradox is given by the practical-theological family research mentioned above. It clarifies the connection to the pillarization of the past when the catholic school had a clear task within the religious upbringing and was complementary to the task of parents and Church. This has led to expectations which are still seen today: that the catholic school should do that which the parents do not feel capable of doing. Remarkably enough, especially secular parents expect this because they realize they are not able to teach their children on religious matters. The inherited catholic expectations from the past of the complementarity of school and family contributes in the current secular setting to parents wishing that the catholic school identity is made more apparent. In addition, catholic focus on community plays a role. For many generations catholic life was formed from cradle to grave according to a fixed pattern. The self-evident belonging to a church has now made way for large-scale secularism. Massive secularization however, has not meant a decrease in the longing for community. To the contrary. In an individualized culture, a personal longing to be connected to an inspired and sheltering community has increased. Catholicism still provides an answer, also for secular people. Occasionally in a cultural catholic sharing of common values and communal orientation. And sometimes in the religious ritual framework that helps people in their longing for transcendence and dealing with the highs and lows in life. The catholic variants continue in the expectations of catholic education; in the longing for the school to be just such an inspired community. Precisely because these kinds of communities do not exist outside the school anymore. Looking at it in this way, it is especially due to secularization that parents and teachers wish for children but also for themselves to get in touch with a community that is inspired, where catholic spirituality is made visible and where not the institutional and dogmatic aspects of the Church play a central role but rather celebrating, ethics, and community life. What parents, school principals and teachers wish to impart on pupils is the realization and experience of being part of an inspired and inspiring community in which you are protected and know that you are connected to the other: the other with a small letter 'o' and the Other with a capital 'O'. For as an inspired community the catholic school stands close to life, and is an accessible way of being Church. Therefore catholic education is closely connected to the Church vision of the catholic school as a breeding ground for faithful life, where community formation, celebrations, learning, and service all take place.<sup>xvi</sup>

## 5. Urgent questions

The approach proposed in this article points to several issues requiring further study and reflection. One of the most urgent issues concerns the way in which implicit and explicit religiosity are intertwined within school life. Family research reports that a constant attention to the explicit religiosity supports the development of the implicit religiosity. Therefore, further investigation of catholic school life is demanded. Another issue that has to be encountered is the search for inspiring contacts between school life and the catholic religious tradition. For the family research accounting for the increasing significance of an inspiring community, might be meaningful for catholic schools as well.

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<sup>i</sup> Algemeen Directorium voor de Catechese, in Kerkelijke documentatie 26 (1998), nr. 61-72

<sup>ii</sup> A. J. M. Elshof. (2008). *Van huis uit katholiek. een praktisch-theologisch, semiotisch onderzoek naar de ontwikkeling van religiositeit in drie generaties van rooms-katholieke families*. Eburon; T. Elshof (2012). *The Development of Religiosity and Religious*

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Socialisation over three Generations of Roman Catholic Family Life. In: D. Owetschkin (Hg). *Tradierungsprozesse im Wandel der Moderne. Religion und Familie im Spannungsfeld von Konfessionalität und Pluralisierung*. Klartext Verlag, 165-180

<sup>iii</sup> T. Elshof (2013). Religious Narrative and the Body. In: R. Ganzevoort (ed). *Religious Stories we live by. Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies*. Brill. 157-167. In press, to be published in December 2013.

<sup>iv</sup> This approach is in line with the hermeneutical practical-theology which regards the practice as a network of interpretations. See G. Dingemans (1986). *Manieren van doen. Inleiding tot de studie van de praktische theologie*. Kok

<sup>v</sup> A. de Wolff (2000). *Typisch Christelijk. Een onderzoek naar de identiteit van een christelijke school en haar vormgeving*. Kok

<sup>vi</sup> De Wolff, 69-94

<sup>vii</sup> De Wolff, 67

<sup>viii</sup> This statement does not imply that the social domain is not important within protestant education, but concerns the question whether this domain is important as a reference of religious identity.

<sup>ix</sup> Gaudium en Spes, Lumen Gentium Apostolicam Actuositatem

<sup>x</sup> T. Elshof (2013). De katholieke school: tussen kerk en wereld. In: *Communio. Internationaal Katholiek Tijdschrift* (Dutch-Flemish Edition). In press, to be published in November 2013

<sup>xi</sup> Pauselijke Raad voor Gerechtigheid en Vrede (2004). *Compendium van de Sociale Leer van de Kerk*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana; T. CASPERS (2012). *Proeven van goed samenleven. Inleiding in het katholiek sociaal denken*, Adveniat

<sup>xii</sup> Also according to the Algemeen Directorium voor de Catechese

<sup>xiii</sup> D. POLLEFEYT & J. BOUWENS, *Framing the identity of Catholic schools: empirical methodology for quantitative research on the Catholic identity of an education institute*, In: *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 2 (2010) 2, 193 - 211.

<sup>xiv</sup> A. de Jong & Th. Van der Zee (2008). *Inspireren tot participatie. Onderzoek naar inspirerende activiteiten en leraren op katholieke scholen*. Damon

<sup>xv</sup> TERTIO DOSSIER: *Ouders verkiezen katholiek onderwijs*. 11 januari 2012

<sup>xvi</sup> NEDERLANDSE BISSCHOPPENCONFERENTIE (2002). *Bezield en Zelfbewust. Beleidsnota met het oog op een nieuwe dynamiek en een gedeelde visie in het katholiek onderwijs*. Utrecht: Secretariaat RKK

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