

Paul Vermeer
Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands
p.vermeer@ftr.ru.nl
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RELIGION TOPIC OR SUBJECT?
On the place of religion in the school's curriculum

Abstract

This paper makes a plea for treating religion as a discipline to be taught in school as a separate subject. For that matter, the paper starts by discussing the ongoing secularization of religious education in terms of the gradual loss of religious learning content. A process which is certainly evident in the Netherlands and which probably takes place in other Western countries as well. Next, the overall educational value of discussing religion in school is defended in part by comparing recent developments in the Netherlands with recent developments in France. A comparison which shows that learning about religion cannot be limited to learning mere religious facts, for instance as part of other school subjects, if discussing religion in school is to have general educational value. Against this background, then, a brief outline of a pedagogical approach is presented, which aims to enhance the students' ability to examine religion in an independent and critical way using concepts and thinking skills derived from the academic study of religion.

Introduction: the secularization of religious education in the Netherlands

The issue I want to address in this paper relates to a phenomenon I would like to describe as the secularization of religious education in school. Speaking of the secularization of religious education is not new. For instance, discussing current developments in religious education in Europe, Williams (2007a) also refers to the secularization of religious education as the deconfessionalization of religious education. But that is not what I mean. What I have in mind is a tendency towards the loss of religious content. That is to say, religion and religious traditions serving less and less as the learning content in religious education. No doubt, this latter tendency is closely related to the deconfessionalization of religious education, but it is not the same. Therefore, this loss of religious learning content deserves our separate attention.

The deconfessionalization of religious education is widespread in Western Europe. Although in many countries religious education may still be officially (de jure) confessional, in practice (de facto) it is actually non-confessional. This is, for instance, the case in the Netherlands where religious education is only taught in denominational schools under the responsibility of the churches, but where the aim of religious education is no longer the transmission of faith. The latter has become virtually impossible as a result of the massive decline in church membership and church attendance in the Netherlands, which also had a profound impact on the student population of denominational schools.¹ And the Netherlands are no exception in this respect (Davie 2000, pp. 82-97). Throughout Europe religious

¹ Despite the pervasive secular character of Dutch society the majority of schools in the Netherlands are denominational, which harbor approximately 60 percent of all students in primary and secondary education. As a result, especially the student populations of mainstream Protestant and Catholic schools consist in large part of youths with no religious background. For a brief explanation of the Dutch educational system and the relationship between public and denominational schools see Vermeer (2013, pp. 85-87).

education deconfessionalizes, if not officially than at least in practice, because secularization makes it increasingly difficult for religious education to assume its traditional task of the transmission of faith.

Of course, this deconfessionalization of religious education also led to a reconsideration of the aim and content of religious education. In the Netherlands this resulted in an approach known as worldview education or worldview formation, which aims to help students to develop a personal worldview or philosophy of life (Vermeer, 2013, pp. 87-89).² Today this approach is widespread in Dutch denominational schools and is also endorsed by religious education teachers in the Netherlands, because, I assume, many of them are attracted to the idea of contributing to the formation of students and dislike the idea of mainly transmitting knowledge. But the consequence of this development towards worldview education has been, that information about religion and religious traditions nowadays hardly serves as a learning content. To illustrate this, in one of the most widely used textbooks for religious, i.e. actually worldview, education in Catholic and mainstream Protestant schools only five out of eighteen chapters are about religion. The other chapters discuss existential themes mostly without relating these themes to religion.³ Now, it is especially this latter phenomenon I have in mind when I refer to the secularization of religious education and which I, in the remainder of this paper, want to critically assess.

Why religion is important in school

As mentioned already, my concern is not the deconfessionalization of religious education, but the loss of religious learning content. Due to the gradual transformation of religious education into worldview education in the majority of Dutch denominational schools, Dutch students hardly learn anything about religion. But what is wrong with that? Why is paying attention to religion in school still important in this secular age?

In my opinion, a serious consequence of the way religious education today is practiced in the Netherlands, is that it hardly contributes to one of the core aims of education; viz. helping students to acquire an understanding of the world they live in. For, the latter is not possible without acquiring well-structured knowledge about religion. From both a global and a local perspective knowledge about religion is important. Although religion may perhaps languish in the West, this is certainly not the case on a global scale (cf. for instance Davie, 2002; Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Religion is widespread across the globe and is of personal significance to billions of people. Atheists and agnostics are a minority compared to the overall number of religious believers in the world and in various parts of the world religion has a profound impact upon cultural, social and political life. Global facts that warrant the attention paid to religion in education. And this is especially so in this day and age of globalization and information-technology in which people, and thus also children and youths, are confronted through the media with religious happenings, turmoil and conflicts all over the world on a daily basis. To put it simply, one cannot read the newspapers without some basic knowledge and understanding of religion and religious traditions.

However, paying attention to religion is not only necessary to help pupils understand global developments, but local developments as well. In most West European countries the

² Only in mainstream Protestant and Catholic schools has religious education developed into worldview education. In more orthodox Protestant and Islamic schools, which only comprise 4 to 5 percent of all schools in the Netherlands, religious education is still confessional and aims at the transmission of faith and at strengthening commitment to a specific religious tradition.

³ The textbook I am referring to is called 'point of view', or 'Standpunt' in Dutch. The chapters on religion are about Christianity, Judaism, Islam and God. The other chapters are about existential topics like: friendship, identity, nature, sexuality, beauty, death, relationships et cetera. For those who can read Dutch, more information can be found on the publisher's website: www.damon.nl.

composition of the population has changed dramatically during the past decades due to the strongly increased influx of non-Western immigrants. In the Netherlands, for example, due to immigration the number of Muslims rose from 54.000 in 1971 to 944.000 in 2005; an increase of 1648 percent in just 35 years (Becker & De Hart, 2006, p. 34)! This not only made Islam the third largest religion in the Netherlands, but it also resulted in a growing visible presence of Muslims in Dutch society. But how are students to understand this if their knowledge of, in this case, Islam is only sketchy and fragmentary?

In sum, my concern thus is that students increasingly become religious illiterates incapable of understanding an important dimension of the world they live in. A case in point in this respect is a recent development in France. At the end of the nineteenth century school and church became separated in France, which gradually resulted in the removal of religion and religious education from the curricula of French public schools. But by the late 1980s the question reemerged if the teaching about religions traditions should not again become part of the curriculum of French schools. The principle of *laïcité* had been that ‘successful’, that whole generations of French pupils had become completely ignorant about religion and thus were unable to really understand the history of modern French society, its artistic and literary heritage and its legal and political system (Williame, 2007b, p. 92). So by the end of the twentieth century, religion was again reintroduced in French schools. A development which shows that discussing religion in school is important and has general educational value also in a predominantly secular context.

Religious education is more than teaching about religious facts

Arguing that discussing religion in school is important is, however, not the whole issue. Related to this issue is also the question if this requires a separate subject. As such the educational value of discussing religion in school is not contested in the Netherlands. Due in large part to the growing cultural and religious diversity of the Dutch population, as from 2006 the following core aim ‘cultural differences’ is compulsory in the lower grades for secondary education in the Netherlands: “The student learns about resemblances, differences and changes in culture and worldview in the Netherlands, learns to relate this to his own and others people’s way of life and becomes aware of the significance for Dutch society of having respect for other people’s opinions and way of life.”⁴ A core aim which is further elaborated by stating that attention should be paid, among other things, to the world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and Buddhism. Hence, this core aim not only offers room for discussing religion in Dutch schools, the fact that it is compulsory also shows that the importance of paying attention to religion is as such acknowledged by the state. But the state does not tell schools *how* this should be done! Consequently, in most Dutch schools religion is not a subject but a topic. Of course, it once was, and formally still is, a subject in denominational schools, but due to the aforementioned secularization of religious education this latter subject has now evolved into a kind of worldview education mostly devoid of religious content, while in public schools religion is only fragmentary discussed as part of other school subjects; like: history, geography, literature or social science.

The question if religion should be discussed in school, and which in many European countries is still answered in the affirmative, thus is only part of the problem. A subsequent issue concerns the way this should be done; i.e. does it require a separate subject? Again the French case is instructive here. The reintroduction of religion in French schools also triggered the discussion regarding the *way* in which religion should be taught in school. And although

⁴ In Dutch secondary education 58 core aims are compulsory, which are classified into 7 domains: Dutch, English, mathematics, man and nature, man and society, art and culture and physical movement and sports. The core aim cultural differences is aim 43 and is part of the domain man and society.

this discussion has at present not yet resulted in the creation of a separate subject, it also shows that teaching about religion cannot be restricted to just presenting objective religious facts. In his summary of this discussion, Willaime clearly shows that the teaching of religion in school should be in accordance with the educational mission of the school, which implies that it contributes “(...) to the formation of a deontology of intellectual conduct, including objectivity, procedures of verification and applying proof, free examination and critical reasoning” (Willaime, 2007b, p. 98). In this way, the French case not only shows that discussing religion in school is necessary, but it also shows that this should be done in view of an educational aim that is reminiscent of the ideals of liberal education. That is to say, education should not only transmit cultural knowledge, like knowledge of different religious traditions, but it should also encourage students to develop a personal stance with respect to this cultural knowledge. Especially the latter can be considered an important educational aim, also with respect to religious education, as it aims to enhance critical rationality and personal autonomy which liberates students from the constraints of their immediate cultural environment (cf. for instance Hobson & Edwards, 1999).

Religion as a discipline

By referring to recent developments and discussions in the Netherlands and France, I have tried to show that religion not only deserves to be taught in school, but also that this teaching cannot be reduced to the teaching of mere religious facts. The current Dutch situation in which also the learning content of religious education is increasingly secularized and students only acquire information about religion in a fragmentary manner as part of other subjects, makes me worry about the future of religion in Dutch schools. In this respect, I find the French developments more promising, but I doubt if the educational aim that is envisaged by the teaching of religion in French schools is really feasible without establishing religious education as a separate subject.

As I explained elsewhere (Vermeer, 2012), for students to acquire an understanding of religion it is necessary that religious education is treated as a discipline. By this I mean that they should learn to think and act as a religious scholar, which in turn requires that students acquire general concepts and thinking skills that are used in academic disciplines like religious studies and theology. Although this perhaps may sound strange to religious educators, it is very common in other school subjects. Moreover, it is what makes these subjects independent subjects as part of the school’s curriculum! For instance, history is not about teaching facts, but about learning to reason about the past in order to come to a better understanding of the present. And in order to be able to do this, students, for example, learn to pose historical questions, to use sources as well as discipline-bound concepts and meta-concepts. Likewise, in physics students learn about the properties of force, light or sound and learn to perform small-scale experiments. So, in school students learn about the past or they learn about the physical world by learning to perform the role of the historian or the physicist. Similarly, I believe, students can only learn about religion if they learn to perform the role of the religious scholar or the theologian. The latter, for instance, involves that students acquire general concepts that are used in the study of religion, like holy, sacred, ritual et cetera, learn to approach religion from an ethnographical perspective or become familiar with the basics of hermeneutics and biblical criticism.

Of course, I am aware of the fact that this plea for a more ‘scholarly’ approach to religious education is very ambitious and to some extent even unrealistic; at least it is considered from the perspective of the actual practice of religious education in the Netherlands. Still, it is an approach worth considering, because it has three major advantages. First, it prevents the teaching of religion from being sketchy and fragmentary and allows for a more profound

study of religion in school. This not only helps students to come to a better understanding of religion, but it also enhances their ability of the free examination and critical reflection on religion, which are, as we have seen, important educational goals. Second, treating religious education as based on a specific academic discipline also offers it a clear structure and a legitimate place in the school's curriculum. It prevents religion from being discussed in the margins of other subjects in an incoherent way, because the teaching and learning of religion is based on the structure of a scientific discipline. And, finally, this scholarly approach also enhances the students' cognitive and intellectual development. Students internalize basic concepts and thinking skills, originating in this case from academic disciplines like religious studies and theology, as cognitive, mental tools which enable them to interpret, understand and reflect on a variety of religious phenomena in various settings and situations in an independent way (Vermeer, 2012, pp. 337-339).⁵ Thus they not only acquire knowledge about religion, but they become able also to produce and gather knowledge themselves.

Conclusion

In this short and tentative paper I tried to explain why, in my view, religion should be a full-blown subject in school with a firm basis in the academic study of religion. Only discussing religious topics as part of worldview education or another school subject is not enough, I believe, for students to acquire a systematic understanding of religious phenomena and religious traditions. And the latter again is necessary if students are to understand the world they live in. On a global scale the world is still a religious place, which also affects the local situation of students in Western countries; no matter how secular this local situation may be. Helping students to come to terms with this global and local situation is an important educational goal, which requires that religion is thoroughly and systematically discussed in school. The secularization of religious education, understood in this paper as the loss of religious learning content, thus not only poses a serious threat to the future of religious education as an independent subject, but it also hinders the overall education of youngsters as such.

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⁵ As mentioned already, a more detailed elaboration of my proposal to understand religious education as a discipline aiming to promote scholarly religious thought can be found in Vermeer (2012). But to be honest, my ideas are not new. Already at the beginning of the seventies similar ideas were put forward by the Dutch theologian and educationalist Van der Ven (1973), who, in the footsteps of cognitively oriented educationalists like Bruner, Taba, Wheeler and Gagné, made an almost similar plea for a 'science structure curriculum' with respect to religious education in school (cf also Vermeer, 2004).

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