Chapter 13
Aren't They Too Young? The Challenge of Hermeneutical and Interreligious Learning in Catholic Religious Education: A Flemish Perspective

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Introduction

One of the contemporary discussions in Flanders (Belgium) concerning religious education centres around the question of how much diversity children can cope with. Do they first have to be initiated into one religion, particularly the Catholic one, before they can be brought into contact with other religions? Is interreligious education preferable in a de-traditionalised country where most children do not know a lot about Catholicism? In this chapter, it will be argued that, both on theological and on pedagogical grounds, it is important to take children seriously as agents and as subjects who are not just empty vessels.

The relevance or desirability of interreligious learning in Catholic Religious Education classes is debatable both within the secular society and within church and religious educational contexts. Some atheistic philosophers and politicians prefer a more 'neutral' overview of different religions and react against the longstanding system of confessional religious education within Flemish schools. They would especially suggest introducing a more general, neutral course in the final two years of secondary education (ages 17 and 18) instead of Catholic Religious Education (Loobuyck et al., 2011), based on the idea that adolescents should be helped in taking decisions themselves (see also Dillen, 2014). Others suggest that instead of two hours of confessional religious education a week, one hour should be dedicated to 'comparative religion' (De Morgen, 2011). Some Catholics support this approach because they consider it to be an opportunity to make Catholic religion education even more confessional. However, others have rejected this proposal, because Catholic Religious Education itself is already open for other religions and because

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dealing with other religions (traditions) and persons from other religions within a confessional setting gives the opportunity to deepen one's own tradition and to integrate dialogue as a genuine part of religious learning. They also argue that neutral religious education is not possible. Today confessional religious education, including an interreligious approach, is formally recognised in the curriculum for secondary Catholic Religious Education. The interreligious approach is closely linked to the hermeneutical-communicative approach, which is also the model used for primary education (Pollefeyt, 2008). Nevertheless, some teachers and religious educators prefer a model where there is first 'initiation' or 'socialisation' and only afterwards, when children are older, dialogue and more interreligious learning. In this chapter, I will argue why interreligious learning from the very beginning is possible and relevant. In this way, I will give an answer to the scepticism against religious education from both an atheist and a traditional, more 'conservative' Catholic perspective.

By providing arguments for interreligious learning for young children, based on an analysis of images of children, I also support the model that is presented by my colleagues as the ideal 'Catholic school', namely, a 'dialogue school'. The Flemish theologian Didier Pollefeyt developed a model for research on the Catholic identity of schools, used mainly in Australian and Flemish (Belgian) contexts (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010, 2014). The 'dialogue school' is one important aspect in this broader research on Catholic identity of schools. It refers to the openness of a school for people with various religious and philosophical backgrounds. The dialogue school stimulates open encounters and explicit exchanges about religious issues, between all members of the school, in all their variety. It recognises diversity in religious issues and does not want to hide this diversity in name of a so-called Catholic identity. At the same time, the Catholic identity is not hidden. Being Catholic and being open for other religions is possible as an institutional option, which we call a 'dialogue school'. When I argue in this text for forms of interreligious dialogue for children, it becomes clear that the image of children as competent subjects will be a condition for the dialogue school.

Questions About Interreligious Learning and Children

Interreligious learning with children seems to be quite impossible for many people. Are children able to understand different religious perspectives? Is it desirable to confront children with different religious and philosophical perspectives? In order to help children with the appropriation of one perspective, might it seem better that they are first initiated in one specific religion?

Dialogue is stimulated when the different partners have their own position and are aware of this position. The model of the 'dialogue school' is based upon an empirical typology as developed by the Dutch researchers Hermans and Van Vuygt (1997, pp. 5–27) and Ter Horst (1995, pp. 63–75). Hence, interreligious dialogue in general might profit from partners that are stimulated to develop their own religious

identity. This general position is however not without further questions. How can their 'own identity' best be developed? Why do children need to develop such a religious identity that includes openness for the other? Do children under 12 need religious education that includes an introduction to various religious traditions? To address these questions, an exploration of the different images of children, as they are discussed in pedagogical and theological literature, will be undertaken and will focus on two classical ideas about children, namely, the idea of children as persons (1)'to be socialised' and (2)'to be protected'. The images are closely interrelated and these images need to be confronted with the critique that acknowledges children as 'not-yet-adults'. The image of children portrayed here is as competent subjects rather than as 'not-yet-adults'. These images of children are related to the discussion about interreligious learning with children. It is not the intention of this chapter to deal extensively with images of children but to enrich the discussion about interreligious learning with the perspective of child images (for a longer discussion about this topic, see Dillen, 2005).

Three Images of Children and Childhood Education

Three images of children and their education that enable different positions in the debate on interreligious learning are discussed in this section and consider the paradigm of 'socialisation' (1), protection (2) and participation with the connotation of active involvement, voice and 'having a say' (3).

Socialisation

Among others, the famous American theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas defends the socialisation model. He points out the relevance of traditions and initiation and socialisation of children in a certain narrative tradition (Hauerwas, 1981, p. 169). The narrative Christian tradition contains a critique on the liberal market economy, where individualism and economic profit are central. In the liberal market economy, children are instrumentalised for the economic profit of adults. The child, as such, is not as important as the economic profit it brings for producers and salesmen. An example can be found in advertisements, which are either directed to children as consumers or present children in a particular way in order to persuade adults to buy the products that are advertised. Children might also be used for entertainment, as is the case in programmes such as 'Supernanny', where a so-called educational aim is disguising a market- and profit-oriented approach of children and families. Communitarians, like Hauerwas, consider a community approach as an alternative for this market-oriented approach of children.

The aim of the education of children is then not so much the nurturing of autonomy, health, competitiveness or self-actualisation, which are aims that are

commonly presented in certain therapeutic and pedagogical theories. This socialisation paradigm, rather, considers education as much more than teaching ethical values and practices; it requires an initiation in a moral community.

Religious education, in the contemporary Western society, is often viewed as a form of moral education. The socialisation paradigm goes further in terms of the aim of religious education. Children should be initiated in familial and cultural values and be initiated as responsible members of specific living communities (Hauerwas, 1981, p. 166). This way of looking at children can be found in various Catholic texts and communities as well.

Children are then mainly seen as 'not-yet-adults'. The aim of education is then to let children experience how the adult world functions and to help them to obtain a place in the adult world. Participation means their being a member of a broader community. This approach seems to have only limited space for interreligious learning, expect for the idea that the initiation in the Christian religion might be an initiation in a religion that teaches peace and dialogue. Children might be told to be tolerant with those who profess other faiths. Real dialogue, however, seems to be reserved for those who are more fully initiated in the community.

Protection

Next to the paradigm of socialisation, we distinguish the paradigm of 'protection'. This approach considers children mainly as 'protected persons', because they are often victims of dangerous situations, such as violence or poverty. This approach is closely connected to the socialisation paradigm, as the necessity of socialisation is often defended on the basis of protection of children (Hemrica, 2004).

The Catholic German theologian Albert Biesinger defended the right of children to learn to know God. He used the expression '*Kinder nicht um Gott betrügen'*, which means, children may not be 'kept away' from God. Children always get a certain philosophical or religious life view, and when this is mainly determined by performance, money, television, etc., something very valuable is left out of their education (Biesinger, 1999, p. 88). The underlying view is that faith in God gives people, also children, a certain critical assertiveness. This is a main reason to defend the 'right' of children to religion. Children need religion as an alternative for the messages given by secular society, especially also by advertisements. Biesinger perceives a religion that gives attention to the 'sacred' and to 'transcendence' to be very important and argues that religion is not only for adults but also for children and furthermore, in the light of this perception, parishes should adapt their liturgical gatherings in order to be open for children (Biesinger, 1999, p. 89).

Within this 'protection' model, the idea that children may not be totally free is defended. It is not conceivable to give children the impression that they need to find their own religion. Children need accompaniment. They need examples and people

who have a close relation with them, who guide them in important matters in life, such as world views and religion. On the basis of this model, one could say that those who propose that children have to taste a piece of everything, in order to be able to make their own choice later on, do not really take either children or religion very seriously.

When religion is presented as a fully free and individual choice, one can conclude that it is unimportant which religion one chooses. The claim of particularity, linked to a religion such as Christianity, is then neglected. Religions can be presented as something that does not ask for direct engagement. However, even when parents or teachers or policy makers consider religion as a purely individual choice, they are not really neutral. If religion is unimportant for them, they transmit this attitude, consciously or unconsciously, to their children. The possibility that children will experience religion as something valuable, and that they will deepen religion in order to come to a personal 'choice', is rather limited. Another possibility is that parents or teachers feel themselves in a certain way connected with a certain religion. Religion is then not just an arbitrary object of choice. They will more or less explicitly guide their children in a certain direction, because their children perceive them as related with a certain religion. Adults who take the first option (so-called freedom) will also express their view, which is however coloured by an unqualified vision on the future: 'the future will show what is right'. This seems closely related to 'indifference'.

A position where all choices are (theoretically) open does not really help children to make choices, however. One often hears the metaphor of learning a language in relation to learning a religion. Biesinger (1998) wrote: 'Based on the anxiety that a child will say after ten years that he or she does not want to learn Dutch, but prefers to learn Russian, parents do not avoid to speak their own mother tongue at home' (p. 86). This metaphor functions as an argument for confessional religious education of children, in view of caring for and protecting children.

However, what does this metaphor and the image of children as vulnerable and in need of protection say about interreligious learning? Learning different languages at the same time is possible, when it is initiated at home and consequently continued. Something similar might be possible in religiously mixed parenthood situations. We speak here about religious education. The similarity is then the discussion about when to introduce a foreign language in formal school education. In the Belgian context some will answer at the age of 5 or 7, others only at the age of 11 or later.

On the basis of the protection paradigm and the image of a child as vulnerable, many will argue that interreligious learning can best start later in childhood (after 11). Roebben (2013, 144) refers here to educators 'who themselves have been brought up in a time of a linear-chronological education and who therefore assume that one first needs to feel at "home" somewhere before one can engage oneself in a conversation "outdoors"'.

It might be that children are overburdened when they are confronted with too many perspectives at a very young age. Young children cannot make their own conscious choices about complex themes such as religion – that is at least what is held on the basis of the 'protection' model. Therefore, a need for accompaniment, guidance and socialisation of children into one religion is necessary. Later on they can ask critical questions and compare with other religions.

Critical Perspectives on the Image of Children as Not-Yet-Adults, to Be Socialised and Protected

The models discussed, 'socialisation' and 'protection', start from a general image of children as very different from adults. Children are mainly considered on the basis of what they are not yet able to do in comparison with adults. After the general presentation of the two models above, some critical remarks on these images of children with the focus on 'initiation' or 'protection' are presented.

The sociological concept 'socialisation' is used to discuss the relation between adults and children, with the burden of responsibility on the adults. Children were – until recently – often considered as uncivilised people who had to learn the rules of society, to integrate and to socialise. This vision is based on a certain dualism: on the one hand society with its rules and institutions and on the other hand, the individual, who has to be cultivated by society (Van den Bergh, 1998). Children were considered as 'naturally' unsocialised people.

The concept of socialisation is criticised more and more, as children are presented as incompetent, not responsible and not-yet-adults. They are presented as merely passive objects of socialisation. They are 'persons-in-the-making' and thus pedagogical projects. Children are approached from a 'deficit' model, from what they are lacking or from what is 'not-yet-there', more than on the basis of the competencies of children (Van den Bergh, 1998). Education and socialisation are merely important for the future and not so much for the children themselves.

This image of children is not only something from the past. It can be found in contemporary literature, practices and church documents. An example of this is *Familiaris Consortio* where Pope John Paul II (1981) speaks about children as 'the springtime of life, the anticipation of the future history of each of our present earthly homelands'. He continues:

> No country on earth, no political system can think of its own future otherwise than through the image of these new generations that will receive from their parents the manifold heritage of values, duties and aspirations of the nation to which they belong and of the whole human family. (para. 26)

Likewise, in recent ecclesial documents the focus is on education or protection of children (Pontifical Council on the Family, 2002).

On the other hand we find another approach where children are understood to be competent subjects. This may be found in frequent recent pedagogical and

sociological literature (Cannella, 1997; James & Prout, 1990; Vanobbergen, 2001) and also in theological essays and books (Timmers-Huigens, 2002; Miller-McLemore, 2003).

Children as Competent Subjects

The image of children that is developed below presents children as competent subjects. The central question is not 'how can children best be initiated and socialised in a narrative community?' or 'how can society prevent children from becoming the victim of many new evolutions?', but 'how can children receive the opportunity to flourish and use their own competencies?'

This image presents children as they are here and now, with their own competencies, knowledge, wisdom and experiences. The behaviour of children is considered less on the basis of the next phase, as a stop 'on the road to something else', and rather more as an expression of the individual personality and experiences of children, separating the growth from the aim. Classical stage models in developmental psychology are criticised on the basis of this thinking.

Traditionally one thinks that when a child is little, it is egocentric (Fowler, 1981). Later, the child will develop naturally, following the 'nature of things' or stimulated by others. The aim seems to be clear. In line with postmodern culture, these universalistic beliefs of developmental psychological schemes are questioned. Critics state that these theories are based on a predetermined view. Koops (1997) indicated that recent developmental psychologists are developing further research about possibilities of communication with young children, as thinking in stages, in terms of what children are not yet able to do, diminishes the opportunities for communication and in fact 'many excellent researchers in developmental psychology end up as experts in babies' (p. 50). Scientists are discovering that babies and small children have at their disposal more competencies than we usually associate with them. Children are considered to be capable of cognitive operations such as the development of concepts, symbolic representation and abstraction. Koops argued that young children are not so fundamentally different from adults concerning the structure of their thoughts. At the age of 3, they can distinguish between mental and physical worlds. 'If they are told a story about a boy who possesses a dog and a boy who thinks about a dog, three-year-olds give a right answer on the question of which dog can be touched and cuddled and which may not' (p. 52). Toddlers can understand that people react on the basis of their own subjective ideas and not so much on the basis of facts (Koops & Meerum Terwogt, 1994; Rieffe, Koops, & Meerum Terwogt, 1996). On the basis of simple tests, it is found that children are able to do much more than we usually think (Dillen, 2007).

With the image of children as 'competent subjects', it is perceived that children possess more competencies than we usually think, if they only have the opportunity to express them. The concept 'subject' means that a child is not only a passive object to be cared for, but that he or she can take up their own responsibilities in

many cases, of course within certain boundaries, taking into account the development of children. Taking children seriously as they are now, and not only as who they should be in the future, means recognising the personhood of children as a valuable aim and not only as human social capital. This recognition will improve the sense of dignity of children.

Consequences of Considering Children as Competent Subjects for Religious Education

This vision of children as competent subjects, and the critique on the monolithic focus on socialisation, has stimulated new accents in the research on religious education. Especially church leaders have been searching for ways in which children can best be socialised, in view of internalisation of fixed contents and clear aspects of a religious tradition (Synod of Bishops, 2012). The term 'faith transmission' can however be put under discussion. 'Faith communication' and 'religious education' are concepts that take dialogue much more seriously (Boyatzis & Janicki, 2003). Children as active participants are taken more seriously. Some scholars in religious education consider children as a more central group and do not only consider them from the perspective of their relations with adults (see, for instance, most articles in the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* or in the *Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie*). The starting point is that children themselves have a vision on faith and life. They are not spiritually incompetent (Hyde, 2008). Children, of course, express faith in their own way, but this is not necessary less valuable than that of adults. If children play with visualisations of faith, if they dance when saying a prayer or use their own interpretations of biblical text, this is not necessarily 'wrong' or 'immature'. It is their own way of doing things. The individual 'theology' that children develop their own thinking and reasoning and religious questions is worth being studied. Children might also be a source of 'revelation'; they can awaken and deepen spiritual insights.

Schweitzer (2013) spoke about the right of children to religion. This implies that religious education is in favour of children and not so much in favour of the church. This vision is closely related to the two previous models, but there is a difference. Schweitzer defended the right to religion on the basis of the individual competencies of children, while in the other paradigms, the deficits and the threats to children are central. Religious education is important for the moment itself, not only for the future.

Speaking about initiation in a tradition only recognises children and the community if children get the opportunity to have a critically constructive participation in the community. The American ethicist John Wall (2004) wrote: 'Children need not just *initiation* into wider social stories, in which their roles and responsibilities

come to them already historically defined, but also the nurturance of active *capabilities* for weaving new and more expansive stories of their own' (p. 84). Within the Anglo-Saxon focus on 'children's spirituality' and the German focus on 'Kindertheologie' (child theology), it becomes clear that children have more competencies and capacities than one might assume on the basis of a unilateral initiation and socialisation paradigm. If these capacities are taken seriously, this is valuable both for the children and the religious community. Children can develop themselves, in critical confrontation with a frame that is offered. The religious community profits from children's participation because more members are actively contributing to the richness of the tradition. Children ask pertinent questions which lead adults to think about their own understanding. Initiation and interpretation go together under the condition that 'initiation' is not seen as a unidirectional process of transfer of adults to children but considered in an open, critical and multidirectional way.

The critical questioning of the religious narrative tradition is necessary when the ambiguity of reality is taken seriously. Religious traditions are not perfect and are coloured by human limitations. The initiation in a religious tradition and narrative community may not be considered as the aim of religious communication, without also stimulating a critical hermeneutical approach of the tradition. We can speak about the 'adventure of tradition' (Haers, 1999): the Christian tradition develops permanently and can never be considered as perfect. Such an open approach of tradition is also very important for religious education, certainly when it concerns the context of a school where the religious community is somehow less present than in contexts of parishes' catechesis.

When children are not considered as active subjects who have their own spiritual competencies rather than as 'not-yet-adults', interreligious learning is a real possibility. It is even preferable, as it helps children to deal with the religious diversity they will encounter in daily life, or with their actual questions, even at a very young age. On the basis of this image of children, there is no big gap between children and adults. Children can, as adults, learn from the interaction between religions.

Conclusion

Specific assumptions on the possibility and the value of interreligious learning with children go together, with specific ideas about who children are and what the aim of religious education might be. These ideas are influenced by theological, ethical and pedagogical assumptions. On the basis of a socialisation and protection vision of children, there is not much room for interreligious learning as an aim or method in religious education. The idea of children as competent subjects, however, supports the relevance of interreligious learning for children. This vision of children as

competent subjects gives an argument with which to criticise one aspect of the reluctance many people show when it concerns children and religious education.

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