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## Religious education in the secularised Netherlands

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Being a religious educator in Western Europe, especially in the highly secularised Netherlands, is a complicated job. There are concepts to be taught to a generation that is mostly religiously illiterate. Religion is subject to many discussions that foremost include the media's coverage of extremist versions of religion. It has become more difficult to teach children about religion and to have a narrative dialogue with them. In our research, we focus on different types of young people that can be found in the classroom; mixed patterns of commitment to religious institutes and variable amounts of concern with religion in forming their identity. A five yearly survey gives insight into values that pupils find important in their lives and shows whether they think of themselves as religious or believing, or not. Secondly, together with theological students and secondary school teachers, we have created and developed possible strategies for religious education. Developed lessons, activities and materials can be practiced and used by religious education teachers to educate the pluralistic but spiritual classroom they are faced with.

**Keywords:** typology of youth; religious education; Catholic secondary schools; narrative dialogue

### 1. The secularised Netherlands

Like many western European countries, the Netherlands is a pluralistic, multi-religious and secularised country. With its origin in Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, the Netherlands nowadays has religious percentages as presented and as compared to world figures (Table 1).

Over the last decades, there has been a decline of the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches in the Netherlands. Hellemans calls the decline the third stage of main churches: 'far reaching secularization and increasing marginalization of the main churches without the rise of new churches or groups to fill up the void. [...] these countries are tending towards becoming "post-Christian" in the near future' (Hellemans and Jonkers 2015, 3).

The place of youth in today's Dutch society is not very different from the rest of Western Europe. Different types of Dutch research describe today's youth in Western Europe. As an initial description, some recent publications (Boschma and Groen

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Table 1. Distribution of religions in the Netherlands and in the World.

	The Netherlands (%)	World (%)
No religion	49	12
Christian	40	33
Muslim	5	22
Hindu	0.5	14
Buddhist	0.5	7
Other religion	5	12

Sources: The Netherlands: Schmeets and van Mensvoort (2015). The World: Johnsons and Grim (2013).

2006; Smith and Lindquist Denton 2005; Savage et al. 2006; Spangenberg and Lampert 2009; Collins-Mayo et al. 2010; Dijk-Groeneboer 2010; D'Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier 2013) will be used to characterise 'today's youth', a generation that is sometimes called Generation Y, Generation Einstein, the Millennials, or the Boundless Generation. By doing so, a basic sketch is made of youth in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Faith of Generation Y* (2010), Collins-Mayo et al. report a study in England of over 300 young people between the ages of 18 and 23. Two main conclusions provide insight into the religion of today's youth. First, young people have not inherited the rebellious hostility to religion and church as seen in their parents' generation. Secondly, for many youth religion is simply irrelevant to everyday living. In Australia similar descriptions were established by Rossiter (2010): 'as if it [this cultural-religious framework, MvD] no longer existed; or it has little influence on their thinking' (130).

Findings from these studies suggest that for most young people faith is found primarily in family, friends and themselves as individuals, which is defined as 'immanent faith'. The research shows that they do not miss having knowledge of faith or going to church. They do not know anything about religion or church, and therefore have no idea what this means for their development. Rossiter (2011) states: 'Most young people [...] just appear uninterested in religion; what they are interested in is feel-good experience and lifestyle' (59). I will discuss this in the final paragraph about being a religious educator in the Netherlands.

## 2. Education in the Netherlands

We will now focus on the educational situation in the Netherlands. Education and society are interdependent to each other in a double way. Developments in education are implemented to cause changes in society, and also the other way around: due to societal changes, education changes. However, there is always a cultural lag between developments. For example, the focus of a changing political programme may be outdated by the time the educational system is finalising its part of the programme. Establishing economic growth, reducing criminality and enhancing the health and well-being of people are main purposes in Dutch politics nowadays, and therefore also in educational programmes.

In Dutch society in the twenty-first century, one can easily recognise a meritocratic (Deelrapport 2008, 24) way of reasoning. At the end of the twentieth century, primary school children's personal capacities and achievements determined which educational level they were allowed to enter next. Nowadays, however, the selection of pupils in secondary school types, and especially students in higher education, is based more

and more on merits, talent and effort. Therefore, it looks as if anyone who puts effort into it, can enter the educational level of his or her choice. According to this line of reasoning, those who do not achieve this level do not have the abilities or did not put enough effort into it. One can easily predict what this will do to the motivation of pupils who do not make it to higher educational levels.

Many skills that were needed in centuries past, such as critical thinking and problem solving, are even more relevant today. Yet the way in which these skills are learned and practiced in the twenty-first century is rapidly shifting. There are also new skills to master, such as digital media literacy, that were not even imagined fifty years ago. The twenty-first century skills that are nowadays introduced in secondary schools include learning and innovation skills (communications, creativity, innovation), digital literacy skills (information and media literacy) and career and life skills (flexibility, initiative, social and cross-cultural interaction and leadership), including values and behaviours such as curiosity, caring, confidence and courage. (Trilling and Fadel 2009) These developments should be taken into account when thinking about today's religious education.

### 3. Catholic education in the Netherlands

When we look at the religious background of schools, it seems as if the secularisation process is hardly taking place at all. In the Netherlands, nearly all secondary schools are confessional, being either Roman Catholic or Protestant (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, Den Haag/Heerlen Statline 9-12-2016; Table 2).

But what does it still mean to be a Catholic school? Parents do not choose a school for its religious identity, but much more for its accessibility and quality of education. In 2000, over 40% of non-religious parents chose a school with a religious identity, whereas 20% of religious parents chose public or non-confessional schools.

In our research among pupils at confessional schools, which I will discuss later, we found that the main reasons to choose a school were location (40%), reputation (36%) and atmosphere (30%). The school's identity was seldom mentioned; only 8% of Christian pupils gave this as a reason. As it was possible to provide more than one answer to this question, these figures show that choosing a school based on confession did not play any part in their choice at all.

### 4. Young people at secondary schools

Having described Dutch society, the educational system, and the identity of the schools, let us now focus on the pupils that religious educators deal with. What do

Table 2. Number of secondary schools in the Netherlands in 2014–2015 analysed by religion ( $N = 655$ ).

Public	184
Protestant	133
Catholic	153
Other non-public	185

Source: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, Den Haag/Heerlen Statline 9-12-2016

we know about these young people aged 12 to 18? Do they regard themselves as religious? Are they active in church? What values do they consider important in their lives?

During these years of formation, young people develop and go through major changes. Their bodies grow from child to adolescent, and at the same time they mentally grow into adulthood. For example, they prepare to move from secondary school into college or university, or they start thinking about their future jobs. They also start thinking about the transition from living at home with their parents to moving out into the world and becoming autonomous. Their search for relationships is very important in these years, and spending time with peers is their main way of dealing with the many changes and challenges they experience. There are many choices to be made, and as a result of globalisation and the Internet, the entire world is now available to choose from.

In a Catholic school, large amounts of non-Catholic pupils will be present. An indication of figures can be deduced from a study among pupils in *Catholic* secondary schools (Table 3).<sup>2</sup>

The group that calls itself Christian has only 16% of Roman Catholics, with the other 20% being Protestant or of another Christian faith. When teaching religious education, teachers have to be aware of the fact that most pupils are not religious, especially not Roman Catholic, and therefore often know nothing about the Roman Catholic faith, tradition, rituals and so on. We can call these pupils religiously analphabetic; there is at least a need for teaching them *about* religion. I will discuss this more in-depth later on.

As we have seen, these pupils do not automatically come from the same religious background, in contrast to what the formal identity of the school suggests. I underline here what Rossiter (2010) states that ‘helping young people learn how to identify, interpret and evaluate contemporary spiritual/moral issues need to become a more prominent part of religious education, especially in the senior years’ (130).

Let us now focus on the identity and religion of these pupils, the things they value, and their sources of inspiration before jumping to suggestions for their religious education.

### 5. Sources of inspiration among pupils<sup>3</sup>

Every five years since 1997, researchers at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology have conducted a survey among Dutch pupils at Catholic secondary schools, regarding their religion, beliefs, and values in life.<sup>4</sup>

The survey questionnaire was built around a number of questions that are often used to describe values and value orientations, which was first introduced in the

Table 3. Religious background of pupils in Catholic schools ( $N = 1450$ ).

No religion	52%
Christian	36%
Muslim	3%
Hindu	0.8%
Buddhist	0.2%
Other religion	8.5%

Source: Dijk-Groeneboer and Brijan (2013).

Netherlands in the SOCON programme (short for the Dutch association: *SOciaalCulturele ONtwikkelingen*) by Felling, Peters and Schreuder (Nijmegen University, 1983).<sup>5</sup> To be able to compare the results in time, the same order of questions and answers has been kept. In addition, a few new questions are added to the questionnaire every five years.

In our latest empirical research, 1450 pupils were reached in 15 secondary schools, which were mainly Catholic and some Protestant. The age of the participants varied from 15 to 18 years old. Fifty-one per cent of the pupils were boys and 49% were girls. The teachers in these schools were known to the researchers because they were graduates of Tilburg School of Catholic Theology and were willing to participate. The study was aimed at pupils at a certain level of education: Higher General Secondary Education (HAVO) and pre-university education (VWO). The digital questionnaires were handed to them by their teachers during class. Parents and school management were not asked for permission. The teachers were promised an overview of the information that would be relevant in the framework of their classes on religious education or philosophy of life, but they were not able to see the individual answers, nor to trace these back to pupils. The schools were situated all over the Netherlands and were located in both urban and rural areas. The response was 95% – which is extremely high – as a result of the integration of the questionnaire into classes.

A part of the 2012 questionnaire asked pupils directly if they had anything to do with religion, faith or God (Table 4).

Over a third of the pupils claimed to be religious. Almost a fifth of the pupils said they *wanted* to believe but did not know how. Forty-one per cent acknowledged not to know exactly what they believed in, whereas 49% objected to calling religion old-fashioned. This is relevant to religion teachers, for a dialogue with pupils about exactly these statements can be helpful and inspiring. I will discuss this at the end of the article.

The pupils were presented a list of 23 values<sup>6</sup> that people find important in their lives. They were asked to point out whether or not these values meant something in their lives (Table 5).<sup>7</sup>

In the list of 23 values, there were three values directly concerned with faith and belief (Table 6).

These values were the least important to pupils. Guidance by or trust in God, Allah or a Higher power is hardly appreciated and having faith or believing is not highly valued either compared to all other values in the list.

Besides these quantitative questions, pupils were asked to describe in their own words what was important to them in the fields of religion, faith and the meaning

Table 4. Statements of youth concerning their religion and belief ( $N = 1450$ ).

	Disagree (totally) (%)	Do not know (%)	Agree (totally) (%)
I am religious	59	7	34
I know exactly in what I believe	41	11	48
I want to believe but I do not know how	75	8	17
I think religion is old-fashioned	49	17	34

Source: Dijk-Groeneboer and Brijan (2013).

Table 5. Important values in life ( $N = 1450$ ).

Enjoy life	93%
Be happy with yourself	93%
Be free and independent	91%
Have a happy relationship	88%
Be a good human being	83%

Source: Dijk-Groeneboer and Brijan (2013).

Table 6. Faith-related values in life ( $N = 1450$ ).

Having a life guided by God, Allah or a Higher power	15%
Having trust in God, Allah or a Higher power	19%
Having faith	22%

Source: Dijk-Groeneboer and Brijan (2013).

of life. Important themes that emerged from these answers were: faith having its limits ('one can believe as long as it does not hurt other people') and faith in juxtaposition with matters such as 'finding worldly matters important' and 'trying to keep the balance between believing and living'. Many responses stressed the importance of balance, that is, 'everyone can believe what he or she wants, as long as this belief is not foisted on anyone else'. Tolerance of faith was also mentioned a great deal, as well as the importance of being aware of the excesses that faith can cause.

Whether or not the respondents think of themselves as religious, believing, or church-belonging is very hard to establish. They differ in their answers, and a conclusion could therefore be that these concepts do not function in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, they were asked whether they would like to talk to others about faith. More than half of the respondents (55%) does not like to talk to others about their faith. Only a small number of youth (13%) would like to meet others who believe, but half of the group (49%) disagrees. What is also interesting is that almost a quarter (24%) of the respondents admit that they do not have the courage to express their faith always and everywhere. It is hard for young people to talk about religion in public and they seem to be in need of a safe environment to do so. A classroom setting might provide this environment if the teacher is able to create confidence and safety.

The respondents were also specifically asked whether or not they liked to be in surroundings where they could feel a certain religious atmosphere, or where they could feel intensely happy or at ease, or where they could have religious or sacred experiences. It is clear from the responses that the main area for inspiration is music.<sup>8</sup> About 63% of all pupils agree with the statement that music is important because it helps them when they are sad. Therefore, music can be an interesting tool to access the values, feelings and beliefs of pupils.

Churches, mosques and chapels are barely seen as inspiring places (9%), whereas nature (20%) and sports (37%) are highly valued next to music. Of the many choices that youth are faced with, religion is not a main one. Although today's youth are searching for answers to the big questions, they go about it in less traditional ways. Moreover, a part of today's young generation has difficulties in dealing with the many choices that can be made in our globalised world. For them, life can be difficult.

They will easily abandon the ordinary ways of finding meaning in their lives. For this group, a religion that has a clear framework can become attractive in order to answer the difficult questions in life. Educating these pupils, talking about their values and finding ways to strengthen them is therefore of high importance.

## **6. Typology of pupils in the classroom**

A typology of religious youth can be helpful when discussing possible solutions for educating youth. The following typology has been principally developed out of the described longitudinal survey research by the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology. The results of the survey were compared to quantitative studies by Motivaction, Ziebertz and Kay (2009) c.s., and Collins-Mayo c.s. (2010) over a period of ten years, and were also complemented by qualitative cultural anthropological research and theological studies from different research institutes in the Netherlands. Catholic, Protestant and Muslim youth were all part of the studies used to create these youth types. In 2010, four Dutch researchers gathered to produce a current report about research conducted in the Netherlands over the last ten years concerning young people and their religion.<sup>9</sup> It became clear that an overview of research conducted at the different faculties and research schools in the Netherlands did not exist. Neither did a combination of results exist of different youth studies among young people with different religious backgrounds.

When analysing these qualitative and quantitative studies, a division into four types of youth becomes plausible.<sup>10</sup> These types are defined by applying two dimensions: on the one hand the connection or commitment to a religious institute ('belonging'), and on the other hand the place of religion in forming identity ('believing' – although this is not completely interchangeable). The first dimension is the way in which youth commit themselves to a religious institute, such as a church or a mosque. Do they attend the institute regularly (for example, church on Sundays or mosque on Fridays)? Are they active in groups attached to this institute? The second dimension regards the way in which religion plays a role in life, such as coping with problems, finding friends, making big decisions, behaving in everyday life and choosing life purposes. Rossiter (2010) pronounces this dimension in words as

either religion is prominent and influential in people's accepted cultural meaning, or people can identify with religion nominally, while their behaviour suggests that they are operating out of the common cultural meanings in their society, or seeing their key meanings and spirituality as unrelated to religion. (134)

Of course, the reality behind this two-dimensional thinking is very much simplified; either one is committed to a religious institute or not, and one either gives religion a place in forming one's identity or not. In doing so, a four-group division of young people and their religion can be made (Table 7).

These are, of course, idealised types of people, but this line of thinking helps to describe the different types of youth found in many different research outcomes. Nevertheless, it is hard to conduct quantitative research in which respondents can specifically be divided into these four groups. And above all, young people themselves do not want to be put into a box.

The first group comprises highly engaged and committed young people who, for the most part, have grown up in a religious family, have become acquainted with

Table 7. Typology of youth.

	Active, concerned with religion in forming their identity; <i>Believing</i>	Non-active, not concerned with religion in forming their identity; <i>Non-believing</i>
Committed to a religious institute; <i>Belonging</i>	Fortissimos	Legatos
Not committed to a religious institute; <i>Non-belonging</i>	Spirituosos	Tranquillos

religion in their early years, and are themselves highly connected with a religious institute such as a church or mosque. This group is very active in their own religion and tries to convert others. They try to fulfil the demands of their religion and adopt the entire identity of their religion as their own. In this group, one can also find neo-Catholics or young people who have recently converted to a religion. Most people in this group are orthodox in their religion and in the way they relate to the hierarchic organisation of some churches. They are obedient and non-critical, a bit close-minded, but rather solid. Young people who have difficulties dealing with the choices in life fit in perfectly as well. In research, this group is called the 'Tough Core', consisting of about 10–15% of youth. They can be called *Fortissimos*.

The second group is comprised of youth who will have nothing to do with religion. Sometimes they are aggressively against religion and other times they just do not care. None of them are active in a church or mosque or connected to a religious institute in any way. Moreover, they are not concerned with any form of spiritual or religious questioning. This group of young people, including boundless, hedonistic and materialistic youth, is called the *Tranquillos*.

The third group is well known to religious organisations such as churches or mosques. The young people in this group sometimes attend religious gatherings, mostly on festive or holy days. They know religion through family life, although mainly from a distance, from the 'olden days' of their grandparents. These young people only connect with religious organisations when it is relevant to them, for example when they wish to get married in church. They are not actively committed to a religious institute, and religion or spirituality does not have a large influence on their lives. These young people are called the *Legatos*.

Finally, the fourth group makes up 20–25% of all youth. These youth are not attached to one main religion. Instead, they invent a 'religion' for themselves by combining parts from several religions and spiritual movements. For instance, they like to go to church to light a candle when they need strength, they go for a retreat in Taizé to take a break and reload their energy, and they like to walk in nature and make this a spiritual experience. This is the group that 'shops around' for all kinds of religious and spiritual offers, and combines these offers into a religion that is self-suiting. Still, this type of self-defined religion has much emphasis in their lives. The youth of this group are called the *Spirituosos*.

The typology presented here has been recently developed and, therefore, has not yet been proven by any quantitative research. However, it seems helpful in discussions

and in theorising about religious education to regard young people as at least dividable in four types. Further elaboration and research will be undertaken in the near future.

### **7. Possible strategies for religious education**

Keeping this typology in mind, what can be done as a religious educator in a secularised classroom with these types of pupils? The diversity is large, for instance regarding their knowledge *about* religions. Only the Fortissimo's are familiar with religion, but mostly just their own, without knowing much about other religions. The other groups, especially the Legatos and Tranquillos, know next to nothing about religions, so there is a task for teachers to educate *about* religion. For it has great meaning for pupils to realise that 'religions provide important values reference points for questioning the authenticity of media-conditioned imaginations of the world and of human development that have such a strong influence on young people' (Rossiter 2011, 64).

Our empirical research shows that pupils say they want to believe but do not know how. They even sometimes call themselves religious nevertheless. Would it not be wonderful to start a dialogue about these doubts and questions in the classroom? As Rossiter (2010) also advised: focus on the needs of this contemporary spirituality (141/3), and it even can be called religious in their perspective. Pupils think it important to be a good human being, to enjoy life and have happy relationships. Teachers should talk about these values in the classroom and show which traditions offer a solid base to build upon and can help them achieve the goals in life that they value. Rossiter (2011) calls this the need to include a search for the spiritual and moral dimensions in experience and events (60); review your life, clarify personal values and offering a spiritual/moral viewpoint that could be beneficial for them personally (61). Music for instance can be used to start this dialogue, for many of the pupils in our research admit that this helps them when dealing with feelings of sadness.

Furthermore, the twenty-first century skills specifically include social and cross-cultural skills. Today's society is looking for people with self-confidence, who are strong and can deal with all the choices that must be made in our globalised world. Values such as caring, confidence and courage can easily be taught during religious education classes, for religion is all about these values. Listening to each other, in the diversity of the classroom, will be the best way to practice real-life communication with all the twenty-first century skills needed.

This brings us to our main advice for religion teachers in the secularised Netherlands, based on our research and the societal changes of today. One has to enter into dialogue with pupils, as has been pointed out by several authors. I will quote Professor Gerald Grace when he spoke about this at Heythrop College on the 23rd of June 2015:

If you want your teachers to have impact on young people, you have to support their programme to be witnesses, renew their internal spiritual resources and keep them inspired!

Grace (2010) uses the word 'spiritual capital' in this perspective, which 'draws upon theological literacy but adds to it the dimension of a personal witness to faith in practice, action and relationships [...], a form of personal empowerment [...]: the sustaining resource for everyday leadership in Christian living and working' (120). When a teacher tells pupils about his own religious narratives, for example by

sharing a part of his own biography that has made him the teacher he is with the values he treasures, he will challenge pupils to do exactly the same. Professor Bert Roebben writes about this in his latest book (Roebben 2015) and calls it ‘inclusive religious education’ and ‘going on a journey with your pupils’(34–38). Instead of pointing pupils to where they can find knowledge *about* religions, a teacher travels with them and, through narrative dialogues, dives *into* the religions that are present in each of the participants.

This way of teaching is part of the new two-year programme of the Tilburg University Teacher Training in Religious Education. Taking our duty as a Catholic Faculty seriously (Grace 2010; referring to Miller 2006) to assist Catholic schools, we practice the spiritual capital ourselves as an example and create new resources for schools at the same time by doing so. Lecturers, professors and students explore the programme together. Of course knowledge about theology, religions and didactics is presented and learned. But in addition, the programme includes opportunities and moments for inspiration, such as extracurricular meetings that especially focus on keeping teachers and students inspired. In this way, the programme aims to form teachers who can reproduce this method by being an inspiring dialogue partner for the pupils they will teach in the future. If a teacher can be a witness of his own values and beliefs, he can enter into dialogue with young people – in their broad variety – in an inspiring and open way. By doing so, a teacher can *form* them to become people who are strong and self-confident and who know their values and religion by being witnesses themselves in turn.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. This line of thinking can be found in Dijk-Groeneboer (2012).
2. See also Miedema et al. (2013); Faber (2012), and Dijk-Groeneboer and Brijan (2013, 5).
3. Part of the research presented in this chapter and the next was first published in the *Journal of Youth and Theology* (2015).
4. Published earlier in this regard: three times with Dijk-Groeneboer and Maas: “Searching during a lifetime.” *Op zoektocht; levenslang* (2001), “Faith? Let’s see!” *Geloof? ff checke!* (2005), and “Religion? So what!!” *Godsdienst? Lekker belangrijk!* (2008) in which data were used from 1997, 2002 and 2007/8, respectively. In the last report, research results come from data collected in 2012/13 and are presented in: Dijk-Groeneboer and Bernice Brijan (2013), “Church out of sight? Young people inspire”! *Kerk uit zicht? Jongeren inspireren!* Utrecht: Faculteit Katholieke Theologie UvT.
5. The full questionnaire, in Dutch, can be obtained at the author, m.c.h.vandijk@uvt.nl
6. As mentioned, the questionnaire is partly taken from the SOCON project 1983.
7. Tested with a five-point scale, where they could score ‘very important’, ‘important’, ‘equal’, ‘unimportant’, and ‘very unimportant’.
8. For every statement one could choose from the responses: agree, disagree or equal.
9. These four researchers were: Martijn de Koning (ISIM), Joris Kregting (KASKI), Johan Roeland (VU) and Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer (UvT, TST).
10. This division of four groups is developed and illustrated in Dijk-Groeneboer (2010), Hellemans and Wissink (2012, 241–257), and Dijk-Groeneboer (2015, 25–45). Large data sets that were used for the quantitative numbers are: European Social Survey Round 1 Data (2002), SOCON (2005), God in Nederland (2006), Culturele Veranderingen in Nederland (2004), Bernts, Dekker, De Hart (2007).

### Notes on contributor

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