

Report on the symposium

"Schools and Religions: What is the relationship? Possible perspectives?" (Brussels, 12-14 November 2023)¹

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Presentation : From 12 to 14 November 2023, the international symposium "Schools and Religions", organised by the CRER (Centre de Recherche en Éducation et Religions) in Brussels, brought together specialists coming from different contexts (Lebanon, Alsace, Marseille, Germany, Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgium). Together, they shared their expertise and thoughts on three major themes: cultural and religious plurality, the identity of Catholic schools and the teaching of religion.

Présentation : Du 12 au 14 novembre 2023, le colloque international « École et religions », organisé par le CRER (Centre de Recherche en Éducation et Religions) à Bruxelles, a réuni des spécialistes issus de contextes différents (Liban, Alsace, Marseille, Allemagne, Belgique néerlandophone et francophone). Ensemble, ils ont partagé leur expertise et leurs réflexions sur trois grands thèmes : la pluralité culturelle et religieuse, l'identité des écoles catholiques et l'enseignement du fait religieux.

After giving an overview of the educational contexts we are working in, Henri DERROITTE (UCLouvain) opened the discussions with a presentation on today's different ways of speaking about religious education, noting the marginalisation of religion courses for both external and internal reasons. He then invited the symposium participants to reflect on how they could identify valid reasons for continuing to promote these courses.

In the first part, three presentations focused on how to face the challenges of religious diversity in schools. Roula TALHOUK (Saint Joseph University, Beirut) used data to illustrate the changes in Lebanese society, which has undergone a series of crises: Whereas in the past, two periods of catechesis were scheduled each week, this is now being modified to adapt to the presence of Muslims. At the same time, the country is facing severe financial difficulties, which is impacting the number of well-trained catechists. The speaker also shared her experience with

¹ This report is a French version of "Geoffrey LEGRAND, Compte rendu du colloque 'École et religions. Quelles articulations ? Quelles perspectives possibles ?' (Bruxelles, 12-14 novembre 2023), published in *Lumen Vitae*.

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positive encounters (inviting witnesses, visiting mosques, fasting together on a day of Ramadan), while also reminding us of the difficulty of thinking in terms of one common Lebanese citizen. Afterwards, in a fascinating lecture, Guido MEYER (RWTH Aachen University) explored the concept of pluralism in the context of our post-modern democratic societies. At a time when we are faced with ideological movements (populism, fundamentalism, integralism) that oversimplify the problems of a world undergoing profound change, the professor emeritus argued that Christian education and the religion classes still have a particularly stimulating role to play. It can give students the skills they need to find their place in this heterogeneous world: an awareness of tolerance for ambiguity, the development of critical thinking skills, the building of a religious identity, an acknowledgement of the diversity of convictions, traditions and views of the world, and so on. This paradigm shift also requires us to value plurality even within religions, including Christianity. Finally, Jan BOUWENS (KU Leuven) presented several tools from the "Catholic School for Dialogue", in particular the Melbourne and Victoria Scales and the Post-Critical Belief Scale. In his presentation, he detailed four arguments against mono-correlative didactic methods and five indispensable criteria for recontextualisation.

In the second round of presentations, the speakers reflected on the identity and characteristics of Catholic establishments – three more presentations from three different contexts followed. Drawing on his experience in the Marseille region, Christian SALENSON (Institut Catholique de Méditerranée) began by comparing the educational community with the ecclesial community, by virtue of the diversity of its members. He then spoke of the Catholic school as an ecclesial reality that carries a theological mystery in view of the Kingdom. According to him, the educational community's capacity for openness and acceptance, faithful to an educational and pastoral project deeply rooted in the Gospel, constitutes the distinctive character of the Catholic school — its "catholicity". Next, based on a field study examining the perceptions of school pastoral care among Lebanese teachers, Roupheïl ZGHEIB (Saint Joseph University, Beirut) illustrated the extent to which the school's Christian component has been reduced to its catechetical (instruction) and liturgical (Masses, etc.) dimensions, when it should, in fact, have a much broader scope in line with school life as a whole. Finally, in a meticulously prepared lecture, Didier POLLEFEYT (KU Leuven) gave an in-depth analysis of the recent Instruction of the Congregation for Catholic Education, "The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue" (2022) and drew parallels between this text and the Flemish model of the *Katholieke Dialoogschool*.

In the third part of the symposium, participants finally turned their attention to the teaching of religion. Dominique SANTELLI (Institut Catholique de Méditerranée) began by retracing the evolution of religious education in France, from the secularisation of the 1880s under Jules Ferry to the reintroduction of the study of religious facts in schools. She also reiterated the recommendations from the 2002 Debray Report, and suggested a number of avenues for contemporary religious education, including learning to listen actively, education in the complexity of religious phenomena, education in the art of dialogue, and transcending coexistence through fraternity. As for Christophe SPERISSEN and his colleagues (Enseignement de la Religion à l'École, Alsace), they shared their pastoral experiences linked to the EIID project (Education for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue). Questioning the denominational nature of the religion courses, this approach has been approved by the recognised denominations (Israelite, Protestant and Catholic) and has also been supported by

other denominations (Buddhism, Islam). In the context of EIID, a single religion course is therefore organised. It is conducted by a teacher appointed by the denomination and is aimed at developing religious knowledge through dialogue. Finally, based on the statistics on the attendance of religion classes in French-speaking Belgium in both private Catholic and public education, Flore XHONNEUX and Geoffrey LEGRAND (UCLouvain) offered their three propositions for fostering the development of interreligious teaching methods: not restricting oneself to simply seeking common values, but also encouraging students to re-examine their own traditions from within; creating interpersonal and thoughtful identities, considering not only the similarities but also the differences between beliefs; and opening young people up to the difficult aspects of otherness, so that they are in a better position to shape their own identities and deal with the diversity that surrounds them.

At the closing of the two days of lectures, discussions, interactions and workshops (on diversity and denominational matters), it was Vanessa PATIGNY (UCLouvain) who summarised the highlights of the symposium, emphasising that diversity represents both a challenge and an opportunity for education. She also stressed the importance of dialogue, as much in the research concerning the identity of the Catholic school as in the development of knowledge and skills in religious education, for it permits greater self-discovery and a better analysis of one's own religious perceptions.

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