Managing Identity Conflicts and Inter-Belief Dialogue in Religious Pedagogy: The "Symbol Workshops"[1]

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Abstract :
In Brussels' Catholic schools, the attitudes of certain students reflect a growing tendency to withdraw and assert their identity. Through "symbol workshops", teachers are attempting to resolve these hardening attitudes by deconstructing religious stereotypes and encouraging the rebuilding of more thoughtful religious perceptions. For this purpose, they use objects associated with religious worship so that students can delve into the symbolic universe of the other, with the help of their five senses. In addition, by establishing connections between symbols, students are better equipped to distinguish the similarities and differences between beliefs. This article describes the approach (objectives, procedures, guiding principles) and, through the application of various concepts drawn from religious education, seeks to understand how these workshops facilitate the construction of more communicative identities in young people.

Résumé :
Dans les écoles catholiques bruxelloises, les attitudes de certains élèves témoignent d'un repli sur soi et d'une affirmation identitaire de plus en plus marquée. Par l'intermédiaire des « ateliers - symboles », des enseignant(e)s tentent de remédier à ces durcissements en déconstruisant les stéréotypes liés au religieux et en favorisant la reconstruction de conceptions religieuses plus réflexives. Pour ce faire, ils(elles) utilisent des objets liés aux cultes religieux afin que les élèves entrent à l'intérieur de l'univers symbolique de l'autre à l'aide de leurs cinq sens. De plus, grâce aux liens établis entre les symboles, les élèves distinguent mieux les ressemblances et les différences entre les convictions. Cet article présente ce dispositif (objectifs, déroulement, principes généraux) et cherche à comprendre de quelle manière ces ateliers favorisent la construction d'identités plus dialogales chez les jeunes grâce à quelques concepts issus de l'éducation religieuse.

Catholic schools in Brussels are welcoming more and more students from different philosophical and religious backgrounds, some of which even educate a majority of Muslims. For the most part, this situation gives rise to stimulating inter-belief encounters, even if certain emerging practices rekindle questions about the purpose of Christian education. In other instances, the retreat into one's religious identity is becoming increasingly apparent and the lack of dialogue may exacerbate tensions.

[1] This paper is a French version of : Geoffrey LEGRAND, "Gestion des conflits d'identité et dialogue interconvictionnel en pédagogie religieuse. Les 'atelier-symboles'", dans *Lumen Vitae*, 79 (2024/4), p. …

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As was the case in France in September 2023, the question of school attire is a heated topic among teachers in Brussels, in particular the wearing of the headscarf or the abaya: How can we define school policies that apply to all? What differences should be established between activities taking place inside the school and activities outside the school? With regard to the abaya, the debates are focused on its significance: Is this a traditional garment or a religious garment? Why would it be considered a problem to wear it to school? Is it a sign of identity affirmation or religious withdrawal? As for the headscarf, as a general rule it is prohibited alongside any other type of headwear (caps, etc.), but some students, nevertheless, try to circumvent the rule.

These cases illustrate the complex situation faced by schools which are required to manage these identity conflicts. To add to this, the hardening of attitudes is not limited to Muslims – in all religions (including Catholicism), an increasing number of people are withdrawing into themselves out of their fear of alterity, believing that they are taking refuge in a pseudo-security. However, opposite to what we might often hear, we do not believe that these religious questions should remain in the private sphere. On the contrary, along with the Flemish theologians of the *Katholieke Dialoogschool*, we believe that dialogue is crucial to building tomorrow's society[3]. Furthermore, as the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) reminds us, Catholic schools today are being called to serve as "laboratories for a lived inter-culture"[4] where a "grammar of dialogue"[5] is practiced.

These examples affect the religious and civic identity[6] of young people, and cannot be ignored in the context of Christian education. Thus, a series of questions arise: How can we foster dialogue in Catholic schools in order to facilitate coexistence? How do we encourage the change of mindsets? How can we deconstruct prejudices and rebuild identities which are more thoughtful, more open-minded and more communicative?

We believe that "symbol workshops" are an interesting area to explore. Based on observations and discussions with the developers of this project[7], here we will present the objectives, procedures and guiding principles of these workshops. As we elaborate, we will assess the pertinence of such activities with regard to the scientific literature on the implementation of religious education in a pluralistic context.

Objectives

Firstly, some clarification is needed about the participants. In most cases, it involves students at the end of primary school (aged 10-12) or in secondary school (aged 13-18), and in classes

[3] See the vision text of the *Katholieke Dialoogschool* (Catholic Dialogue School): "By dialoguing with others, each person learns to build their own identity, and by discovering it, to reflect on it and to deepen it." Online: https://pincette.katholiekonderwijs.vlaanderen/meta/properties/dc-identifier/Sta-20180416-54, page consulted on 16 May 2024.
[4] CEC, "Educating for Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools", § 58.
[5] CEC, "Educating for Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools", § 57 and CEC, "Educating for Solidarity-based Humanism", § 12.
[6] Several arguments linking religious and civic education can be found in: Geoffrey LEGRAND, *L'éducation religieuse par les symboles. Une chance pour le dialogue interconvictionnel et interreligieux ?* Preface by François-Xavier Amherdt (Théologie pratique en dialogue, 67), Basel, Schwabe Verlag, 2024, p. 19-21.
[7] We thank Latifa El Hamdi and Marie Hubermont (authors of the project), and Béatrice Sepulchre, with whom we discussed these workshops.

that are heterogeneous from a cultural and religious standpoint[8]. As for the moderators who intervene as representatives of their religion, they are often religion teachers, also working in school pastoral work or at inter-religious organisations[9].

When questioned about the purpose of their workshop, the moderators explain that they wish to "build bridges from one symbol to another", showing the unity underlying the various religious symbols, while also acknowledging the existing differences. In short, students learn how to perceive differences within similarities. The activity does not seek to remain at the surface of beliefs, but aims to better understand differences by delving into the depths of religions. The objective of the activity is therefore twofold: on the one hand, to deepen one's knowledge of one's own religion (or discover it), and on the other, to better understand the beliefs of others, by attempting to enter their religious universe. These workshops thus respond to the dual objective of religious education in a plural context: to facilitate the construction of strong identities and to enable students to better manage diversity[10].

Procedures

The "symbol workshops" are organised in three stages:

1) The moderators first invite participants to write down one positive and one negative aspect of the other person's religion. The idea is that students should describe whatever spontaneously comes to mind when they think of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc. These stereotypes are then read out loud in front of the group. This allows the moderators to better identify the religious representations that will need to be deconstructed and rebuilt step by step.

2) In no particular order, the animators will have previously laid out various objects[11] on a table, objects generally used as part of religious ceremonies. Working in teams, students are then tasked with grouping these objects by religion and speculating on their use. Participants are encouraged to observe, describe and touch these objects of worship, using their five senses. Afterwards, they are prompted to discuss and interact with each other in order to establish a classification. Note that three variations of this activity have already been tested: with the addition of musical extracts (a Christian song in Arabic to talk about Eastern Christians, Yemeni music, etc.), the presentation of additional objects brought in by the students themselves, and the use of passages from sacred books[12].

3) The sharing and confirmation phase is a crucial part of the process. The moderators comment on the role of each object by establishing connections between the different religions. For example, when referring to the stone used for dry ablutions in Islam, they immediately ask students about purification rites in other religions (for example, reconciliation in Catholicism).

[8] This activity was also carried out with adults (educators, prison chaplains, etc.)
[9] For example, the El Kalima Center: https://elkalima.be/, page consulted on May 16, 2024.
[10] Hans MENDL, "Religious Didactics under the Terms of Plurality and Heterogeneity", in Jadranka GARMAZ and Alojzije CONDIC (eds.), *Challenges to Religious Education in Contemporary Society* (Theologija, 53), Split, Crkve u svijetu, 2017, pp. 210-220, here pp. 212-213.
[11] For example: a stone for dry ablutions, Catholic, Muslim (misbaha) or Buddhist (mâlâ) rosaries, a kiddush cup (in Judaism, a silver container that can contain wine or grape juice and which is blessed in a ceremony on a holy day), holy chrism, a Hanukkah top (game of chance), a bessamim box (container of spices used by Jews), a rattle (for the Jewish holiday of Purim where it sounds each time Haman is mentioned), a kippah, a veil, etc.
[12] Some rather surprising sentences have been deliberately selected in order to deconstruct pre-established ideas. Here, we insist on the need to put these quotes in their context.

Once again, the idea is to deepen one's understanding of religions: there are parallels between the fasting of Lent and that of Ramadan, between the Bible and the Koran – but these are not identical realities. The objective is not to convert the other, but to learn from them. On completion of this activity, students generally tend to emerge convinced that they feel good (and better educated) in their own religion.

Guiding Principles

The advantages of this method are threefold: it draws from the students' own questions, it allows them to enter the symbolic universe, and it fosters a dialogue-based approach. Firstly, whereas certain teachers might attempt (without much success) to engage students in discussions about inter-religious dialogue without using any aids, here, religious objects are utilised to support the dialogue. As this approach is more tangible and interactive, it is also more motivating for the students.

Secondly, seeking explanations concerning the object's purpose facilitates the exploration of the symbolic universe. Often, it is a Muslim student (or the moderator) who will explain the meaning of a particular object, text or rite in Islam. This crucial phase allows us to enter into the inner logic of the other person's religion – into that which "I cannot understand when I am not a part of this spirituality". Therefore, the activity is not limited to simply describing the object from the outside, but rather seeks to elicit words from within[13]. For example, the seven laps that pilgrims walk around the Kaaba may appear meaningless unless a Muslim explains, in their own words, why this cube is God's sacred dwelling place according to their religion[14]. Similarly, a Christian could also explain how they perceive God's presence in the Eucharist or more broadly, in their life as a believer. Sometimes, a moderator will attempt to explain the meaning of an object from a religious tradition that is not their own, in order to demonstrate that it is possible to enter into the symbolic universe of others. However, they are quickly confronted with the limitations of their own words[15]. This hermeneutic phase thus includes a process of "internal self-criticism" of one's own faith and, at the same time, a "silent dialogue" within one's own convictions[16]. In other words, this process goes through three stages: leaving home, allowing oneself to change, and returning home to discover something new[17].

Finally, the dialogue stage allows us to enter into an inter-religious logic. This stage highlights the conflicts of interpretations ("hermeneutic knots")[18], even between those who profess the same faith (internal pluralisation). It is here that debates gain in substance:

– "Why do some Muslim girls wear the headscarf?", "Why do Jewish men wear the kippah?", "And certain Catholic nuns?"

[13] We are witnessing a combination of the modalities of religious education, as encouraged by Bert Roebben: "in" (transmission), "about" (information), "from" (communication). See Geoffrey LEGRAND, *L'éducation religieuse par les symboles*, p. 33-39.
[14] This raises the question of the legitimacy of the person who will help with this deconstruction/reconstruction. For example, in Islam, do we not need counterarguments from a Muslim to overcome the phenomenon of reciting verses from the Koran?
[15] It is at this point that participants become aware of the nuances behind the words used: this is the case for the notion of mercy in Islam and Christianity.
[16] These concepts come from Paul Tillich and André Gounelle. Sometimes, this inner dialogue will take place after the session.
[17] Javier MELLONI, *Ouverture à la diversité religieuse*, Bruxelles, In Touch, 2021, 2021, p. 24-25.
[18] Expression by Didier Pollefeyt. See Geoffrey LEGRAND, *L'éducation religieuse par les symboles*, p. 179.

– “Halal or not halal?”, “Is it only a ritual prayer that makes it lawful or are there other ethical principles to consider?”, “Why is it allowed (or not allowed) to eat the food from the People of the Book?”

– “What does it mean to ‘be practicing’?”, “In Judaism?”, “In Christianity?”

Often, one person's questioning leads to another's. Moreover, this exercise encourages us to re-examine the obvious, to question ourselves and to think critically, based on experience. This work of deconstructing literal beliefs and reconstructing them to form new conceptions is ultimately about implementing Paul Ricœur's cherished concept of “second naivety”[19]. According to this principle, it is possible to renew one's faith based on a new understanding, even after the immediacy of faith has been challenged by criticism.

Summary and Further Discussion

At the time of the completion of our habilitation work, *L’éducation religieuse par les symboles. Une chance pour le dialogue interculturel et interreligieux ?* , we were searching for ways in which educators might experiment with the theoretical principles then being explored. Among other aspects, we studied the objectives of religious education, the Catholic school as a “laboratory for dialogue”, the creation of identities of openness, the combination of the modalities ‘in’ - ‘about’ - ‘from’, and the importance of working based on hermeneutic knots in order to achieve a second naivety. These “symbol-workshops”, which explore the symbolic and dialogical aspect, align with our concerns and provide particularly interesting possibilities for translating our ideas into reality.

Nevertheless, the participation of representatives from different spiritual backgrounds is essential to the success of the activity. However, in Belgium, classes on religion are denominational and taught by a single teacher. Therefore, rather than conducting these “symbol workshops” in isolation in the classroom, we encourage teachers to collaborate with external and recognised contributors[20] from different religious backgrounds in order to clarify the young people's questions from the inside. Despite this constraint, and that of conducting the activity with a limited number of students in the class, we believe that these workshops represent a genuine opportunity to respond to the challenges associated with identity conflicts in the context of the Brussels school system.

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

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[19] See Geoffrey LEGRAND, *L’éducation religieuse par les symboles*, in particular p. 70.
[20] For the moment, these workshops depend mainly on two people. If they were to multiply, training would be necessary to ensure that these spaces remain places of dialogue led by competent and trusted people.

Droits d'auteurs