

BOOK REVIEWS

QUERY SHEET

No Queries

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INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING. Edited by Didier Pollefeyt. Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2007. xxvi + 340 pp. EURO 80.00.

5 This book contains the papers of an expert meeting that was held
at the University of Leuven (Belgium) in 2005 and to which schol-
ars from Western Europe (mainly Belgium and the Netherlands),
Turkey, South Africa, and the United States were invited. The format
of the meeting was interesting: people were confronted with a set of
statements, they prepared a solid paper that was thoroughly discussed
10 during the meeting, these papers were re-edited and published as a
compendium, a state-of-the-art of interreligious learning (IRL).

Cultural and religious diversity shape our living and learning en-
vironments. In recent years they have become the subject of consid-
erable debate. In many parts of Europe the sensitivity of the explosive
15 ingredients of multicultural conflicts and multi-religious tensions since
9/11 has been permeating the daily classroom. Religious Education
(RE) is in most of the European countries an ordinary school subject.
Pupils are faced with the moral and religious complexities of daily life
in this course and study religion as a social and cultural phenomenon
20 and/or as a way of personal development. The status of the course
of religion is defined by law. Clear and well-discerned commitments
about responsibilities are made by Church and State. In some cases
this implies that the model for the course is “religious studies” (e.g.,
in this book South Africa and Turkey), in many other cases (in most of
25 the Western European countries) pupils attend confessional RE, this
often being the case in a religiously affiliated school.

What is IRL? A starting point is the radical openness to diversity
within the classroom. Young people are involved in learning to rec-
ognize, know, and appreciate differences. At a more profound level,
30 this implies an encounter not only with differences, but also with the
otherness of the other. This happens after preliminary acquaintances
have taken place and after one has done one’s best to acquire infor-
mation about the other and to talk with the other about differences
and similarities. Those who then dig deeper come across differences
35 in interpretation that require clarification. Through this encounter
students not only learn to perceive these differences and to communi-
cate with others so that they can have a better understanding of their

positions, they are also invited to open up their own religious experience to one another. In this regard IRL is, without doubt, a stimulating invitation to learn how to articulate and take responsibility for one's own (non-)religious point of view (in German "Bildung"). The latter is, one could argue, the central aim of Western European RE at school. 40

In this book, scholars from various disciplines and from different religious backgrounds are facing ten challenges to IRL, here formulated as questions. What are the goals of IRL? How can diversity be thematized on the level of the pupil, the classroom, the school? What is the theological status of pluralism and what is the place of religious truth? What kind of teacher is needed for implementing IRL in the classroom? How about the experience of the pupils? How is the religious profile or identity of the school involved when IRL is at stake? What sort of dialogue is needed for IRL? What is the underlying pedagogical paradigm? Which didactical instruments are needed? And finally, how should IRL being assessed in a school context? 45 50

These questions are tackled in systemic, contextual, theological, pedagogical, and didactical approaches. The first part of the book focuses on the concepts (Ziebertz), the process (Berling), and the context (Lombaerts) of IRL. The next part presents various approaches to contemporary RE and its mono-, multi-, and interreligious modeling (Duran, Roux, Sterkens). Then follow the approaches from a Jewish, Christian, and Muslim perspective (resp. Millen, Merrigan, Senay). Part four investigates the moral (Burggraeve) and pedagogical (Wildemeersch/Vanheeswijck) dimensions of IRL. The final part is dedicated to the topic of religious identity development on the level of the pupil (Ter Avest) and the teacher (Bakker). 55 60

Although the research questions are clearly defined, the responses in the different papers are heterogeneous and often contradictory. The terminology is not always clear and/or used in the same way (e.g., the sort of commitment that is presupposed in the "inter" of IRL), the educational goals remain open for discussion (e.g., the implementation of IRL in a confessional school), the tasks of the teacher are diverging, the underlying concepts of theology and religious studies are not always articulated, the thoughts of non-educationalists often remain too idealistic and their proposals for educational outcomes too cognitive, and so on. What is lacking is the critical re-capitulation and appreciation of the different positions in a final chapter, a sort of meta-reflective chapter that helps the reader better to understand the diversity (sic!) within the book. But the issue is of course: Is such a "harmonizing operation" possible within the scope of such a 65 70 75

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- conference book and is it needed at all? One could suggest that the
- 80 close reading of this book precisely invites the reader to formulate his or her own opinion at the end and to pick up the necessary elements for this meta-operation. This could be, for instance, a good exercise for theology or religious studies students: digging up their own religious-educational vision after having read the book.
- 85 What did I learn from the various exciting contributions to this book? I just want to mention a few. For me, the more phenomenological-oriented papers were the most “mind stretching.” Ziebertz concludes from his empirical research that we should remain realistic: young people themselves opt for a more detached “learning
- 90 about religion” approach and, if we will not be able to really introduce the dialogue dimension into RE, this position will only increase, he argues. Sterkens is not optimistic about IRL, because secularization is a continuous threat for religious commitment and experience. In her paper Roux is very close to a “down to earth” approach to IRL-didactics.
- 95 She reports about the “religion education” model in South Africa and shows how teachers are empowered in listening carefully to the expressions of religiosity of fellow human beings in the classroom and in the social environment of the school. “Understanding the intrinsic knowledge of an other” (111) can only be learned through concrete
- 100 field trips, encounters, and personal–spiritual reflection during and after the formal teacher training. Senay is in favor of a phenomenological theology in which the educator should learn to be religiously bilingual: in his or her own community and in the public sphere. Bakker is convinced of the practical knowledge of the teacher as a
- 105 reflective practitioner. People solve problems of religious diversity in the same way as they deal pragmatically with other diversity issues. Schools and school boards (Roman Catholic as well as Protestant in the Netherlands) therefore should radically adopt an inductive style of reframing their confessional heritage and identity. Burggraeve reflects
- 110 on the interreligious encounter on the basis of his Levinas expertise. He critically examines religious “comparativism” and exoticism: “If the other is only appreciated because he or she displays certain characteristics, attributes and qualities whereby they become interesting for me ‘to learn from’, and because so doing they confirm and rein-
- 115 force my identity, then, according to Levinas, we end up in one or the other form of (. . .) ethnocentrism and even racism” (232). The essay of Lombaerts, one of the most comprehensive and at the same time challenging chapters, can be read in the same direction: “For IRL to make sense, in view of interreligious dialogue, it should forsake

its merely 'functional' goals (studying and comparing the respective doctrines, exploring and adjusting rituals and prayers, etc.). Rather, it needs to cultivate an overall climate of gratuity, of disinterest, and of practicing interreligious dialogue for its own sake as a religious act" (82–83). How can this conversion within the conversation take place? How shall we "learn in the presence of the other" (Mary C. Boys)? How can this "practice of dispossession" (Ilse Geerinck) become didactically activated? There is still a long way to go and to understand the full depth of the religious inter-personal encounter. This book is a valuable guide in defining the directions to go. The bumpy pathways, however, have to be explored in daily praxis.

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