



Awaken the Awareness of Transcendence: New Strategies for Catholic Schools in the Netherlands to Deal with Secularization

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Abstract: Secularization poses serious challenges for religiously affiliated schools. Catholic schools in the Netherlands find themselves embarrassed regarding their educational endeavor because they are unable or lack the inspiration to talk about this subject in religious terms. This article aims to explore new ways of overcoming this embarrassment. Firstly, an overview is presented of the current situation and of the embarrassment of Catholic schools, in terms of their problematic choice of actions. Based on a critical-dialogical convergence of theological and pedagogical considerations, a Catholic vision on the educational endeavor is subsequently developed that is understood in terms of interruption, the other, and transcendence. From this vision of the educational endeavor, new strategies are presented – at the community level of Catholic schools, and at the individual level of teachers, school leaders, and governors – to promote an openness to receiving new, unexpected insights and possibilities. The receipt of these insights and possibilities is closely related to an awareness of transcendence, in both a secular and a religious sense. The initial findings of recent empirical research on the impact of these strategies are presented.

Keywords: Catholic schools, religious erosion, awareness of transcendence, Catholic vision on education, strategies

The endeavor of Catholic schools is closely connected to the Church's religious mission. While a Catholic school is understood as one "which a competent ecclesiastical authority or a public ecclesiastical juridic person directs or which ecclesiastical authority recognizes as such through a written document" (*Code of Canon Law* 1983, no. 803.1), in reality, a school is Catholic if it aims to employ a Catholic vision in educating students. The Church considers Catholic schools to be "a privileged means of promoting the formation of the whole man, since the school is a centre in which a specific concept of the world, of man, and of history is developed and conveyed" (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education 1977, no. 8). As Catholic schools are intrinsically connected to the Church's mission, they understand their educational endeavor in terms of the humanization of man and the world, and the formation of the person as a whole, "so that all may attain their eternal destiny and at the same time promote the common good of society" (Miller 2007, 454). The 'proprium' of a Catholic school is related to the religious perspective:

No less than other schools does the Catholic school pursue cultural goals and the human formation of youth. But its proper function is to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities, and finally to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith (*GE 8*).

By striving for the formation of the whole person, Catholic schools deliver a public good to society and are valued as institutions where one can learn – from a religious perspective – what it means to live well.

The striving of Catholic schools for their educational mission is influenced by societal developments, such as secularization, which is a phenomenon with many shapes and layers. Essentially, secularization refers to the phenomenon that people find meaning in life more in terms of inner-worldly connections and less in terms of transcendence (Bruce 2002; Ester, Halman, and de Moor 1994). ‘Secularization’ does not necessarily imply a loss of awareness of transcendence; it can also mean a different form of awareness, which confines the meaning of life to inner-worldly connections. ‘Religiousness,’ on the other hand, refers to the phenomenon that people find meaning in life in terms of the interplay between the world and a transcendent actor: God. ‘Transcendence’ is a core concept regarding meaning in life ‘beyond’ inner-worldly connections, and could therefore provide access to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of both religiousness and secularization (Taylor 2007). In this article, a response from Catholic schools to secularization is investigated from the viewpoint of what religion means when interacting with the world, in terms of promoting an awareness of transcendence.

As they are influenced by secularization, Catholic schools are faced with an erosion of their religiously motivated and oriented endeavor; they are challenged to reconsider it and to find new and responsive ways to act. This article investigates strategies used by Catholic schools in the Netherlands to address secularization in a proactive, transformative way; that is, to turn the tide of religious erosion. The obvious question is, which strategies appear to be the most promising in terms of Catholic schools dealing effectively with secularization?

To answer this question, in the first section an overview is presented of the current situation regarding religiousness and secularization in the Netherlands in general, and in Catholic schools in particular. In the second section, theological and pedagogical considerations are brought to the fore, with a view to designing responsive strategies. The third section presents two new clusters of strategies intended to turn the tide. The article ends with a conclusion and discussion.

1. Setting the Scene: Catholic Schools in a Secularized Country

In this section, an overview of the situation of Catholic schools is presented in the contemporary context. First, the societal context of the Netherlands is described in terms of secularization, individualization, and diversity; and second, the author elaborates on how Catholic schools are influenced by these developments.

1.1. Societal Context of Secularization, Individualization, and Diversity

The Netherlands is one of the most secularized and individualized countries in the world. No fewer than 67.8% of the Dutch population regard themselves as not belonging to any religious community or church (Bernts and Berghuijs 2016, 21–31). The Catholic Church in particular has not only been confronted by a decline in church membership – and a sharp one, among young people; the said authors also observe that the participation rate for religious activities such as the Eucharist and prayer is in decline. The Catholic Church is afflicted by double secularization: there are fewer church members, and the participation of those who remain is dwindling. Although immigration from other European countries (as well as from outside Europe) has brought in new members, churches continue to become more and more marginalized in Dutch society.

Other indicators of religiousness are religious belief and experience. While 58% of church members surveyed experience a transcendent actor or God, only 6% of people who consider themselves non-religious and non-spiritual do the same. Most (but not all) church members emphasize their orientation toward or dependence on a transcendent actor or God through whom they experience guidance and trust in their lives. In only a few cases do secular people refer to God, and in most of those cases in a negative way. Others who describe themselves as spiritual but do not belong to a church indicate that they experience themselves as part of a larger whole, but do not necessarily connect themselves to a transcendent actor or God. Their experience is more oriented towards an inner-worldly reality. The awareness of transcendence appears to be a concept that is very much under strain (Bernts and Berghuijs 2016, 97–119).

The decline of religious affiliation and belief in God in the Netherlands is explained mainly by the modernization of ideologies alongside the expansion of education. As the Dutch population was becoming more and more highly educated, a secular worldview was disseminated among them, which in turn threatened the existing religious plausibility structure. The decline is also explained by the modernization of economics with the rise of existential security, as well as by the modernization of social ties with diminishing Christian socialization. The extent to which educational expansion has driven secularization is remarkable, and largely attributed to the fact

that in the Netherlands, religion is no longer perceived as inseparable from national identity – as it is in Poland, for example (Kregting et al. 2018).

From a sociological perspective, secularization is considered an important and apparently irreversible aspect of the processes of modernization of society (Bruce 2002; Dobbelaere 2002; de Hart, Dekker, and Halman 2013). Religion has lost its societal and public functions, and become privatized and marginalized within its own differentiated sphere. However, research has shown that the reality is far more complicated, multi-layered, and diffuse than the secularization thesis would have us believe (de Hart, Dekker, and Halman 2013, 1–12). Religion is changing shape, becoming less institutional and traditional, and developing a more individual and dynamic character. One should therefore rather speak about “a ‘profusion’ of many (non) religious positions and possibilities among which people are reflexively (i.e. in a non-obvious or naïve way) moving, searching, doubting (partly inspired by the ethics of authenticity)” (de Groof et al. 2012, 47).

Religious diversity is another characteristic of Dutch society. The Eighty Years’ War (1568–1648) with which the Netherlands acquired its independence was in part religiously motivated. As a result of independence, the Protestant religion became privileged, but it was not the only one. Catholic churches and Jewish communities were tolerated, and from the end of the 18th century were more or less guaranteed freedom of religion. Today, Dutch society is religiously diverse, consisting of Roman Catholic (18.2%) and Protestant (13.2%) churches, as well as Islamic (5.6%), Jewish, Hindu, and other (5.9%) communities (Schmeets and Houben 2023).¹

1.2. The Embarrassment of Catholic Schools

Although their impact differs depending on the national context, phenomena such as secularization, diversity, and individualization influence the way in which Catholic schools perceive themselves, fulfill their religiously motivated and oriented educational endeavor, and strive for the humanization of man and the world and the formation of the whole person (Grace 2002; Pring 2018; Wilkin 2018).

In the Netherlands, Catholic schools represent almost one-third of all schools for primary and secondary education. They are recognized by the episcopal Dutch Council for Catholic Schools and supported by government legislation that guarantees freedom of education and accommodates all schools – both religiously affiliated and public ones – from 1917 onwards with full state funding. Since then, they have received the same proportion of funding as all other schools, based on the number of students who attend the school. They are not only financed but also controlled by the government, in terms of the validity and quality of education. As with all other

¹ Due to the use of slightly different research methods, these percentages differ from the results obtained by Bernts and Berghuijs (2016); however, the general picture is quite similar.

schools, Catholic schools are hence regularly visited and supervised by the governmental Inspectorate of Education.

Although Dutch society has become highly secularized, the majority of students and their parents still opt for religiously affiliated schools: 29% of all children in primary and secondary education attend public schools, 30% Catholic schools, 25% Protestant schools, and 16% 'other' schools (Islamic, Hindu and other denominations).² The percentage of students attending Catholic schools is still relatively high, in stark contrast to the double secularization faced by the Catholic Church. This remarkable finding may be explained first by the fact that Catholic schools can be found in all parts of the country – in urban as well as rural areas. The spread and availability of Catholic schools are largely connected to the striving of the Catholic Church to fulfil her mission and provide educational opportunities for all children, with a view to their personal as well as societal emancipation (Lijphart 1975; de Groof et al. 2012). The second reason for this interesting finding may be the stability of Catholic schools and the high esteem in which they have been held over a long period of time. Catholic schools are well known for their high rate of academic achievement, as well as for the attention they pay to personal formation (Dijkstra and Peschar 1996; Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993).

Although Catholic schools are still spread throughout the country, available to all, and highly esteemed in the Netherlands, societal developments such as secularization, diversity and individualization have influenced the way these schools perceive themselves, and indeed, how they strive for their educational endeavor. When asked about the Catholicity of their schools, teachers, school leaders, and governors reveal considerable embarrassment, or perhaps shyness, preferring to state that their schools are like any other (public) schools, and provide excellent educational quality (Dupont 2010, 25–42; van der Zee 2015). This embarrassment or shyness is evidence not only of an inability to talk about the educational endeavor in religious terms but also of a lack of inspiration. The nature of the embarrassment can be clarified in terms of two symptomatic issues: the schools' connection to the Catholic Church, and the subject of religious education.

First, the connection to the Catholic Church has become considerably looser in the past few decades. The Catholic bishops and their Dutch Council for Catholic Schools intervene only marginally regarding the governance, leadership and teaching at schools. Since the 1960s they have considered these to be matters for the lay school governors, leaders, and teachers, except in the case of religious education. Schools generally appear to be pleased with this loose connection and have indicated that what they seek from the Church is mainly inspiration and encouragement (van de Donk 2010). At present, Catholic schools are not visited or supervised by

² <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2017/38/ruim-70-procent-leerlingen-naar-bijzonder-onderwijs>.

an ecclesiastical inspectorate on a regular basis and their teachers, leaders, and governors rarely meet and speak to bishops or other representatives of the Church.

The second issue concerns the subject of religious education. In almost every Catholic school the subject is now named 'worldview education,' and aims to enhance the development of students in terms of ethics and worldview (Bertram-Troost and Visser 2017). While the intent of the name change and transition was to improve its practical relevance, the subject has lost much of its systematic attention to religious traditions and the Christian tradition in particular, in favor of the exploration of personal and societal interests. The name change and transition of the subject suggest a loss of awareness of transcendence.

Buijs (2020) saw three possible explanations for this considerable embarrassment or shyness. First, the legal framework for freedom of education is understood as primarily an opportunity to educate students regarding their own circle, the Catholic community. Catholic schools have neglected to systematically and continuously elaborate a Catholic vision of pedagogics, as well as the societal impact of their education and governance. Although the legal framework is understood as an invitation to develop such a vision, teachers, school leaders, and governors appear satisfied with being able to establish their own schools that are fully state-funded and to experience the freedom of designing their own education to a certain extent. Second, secularization has had an enormous impact on the Catholic population. Because of the sharp decline in participation in religious practices, the available knowledge, insights, and expertise regarding the Christian tradition have disappeared very quickly. Teachers, school leaders, and governors were not able to find an appropriate language for talking about the Catholicity of their schools. It was all or nothing: they used exclusively Church speech when talking about schools, or they threw everything overboard that referred to the Church or religiousness. Third, the fact that Catholic schools are funded in full by the state made them increasingly, almost exclusively dependent on the government. Because they are not only financed but also controlled by the government, in terms of the validity and quality of education, schools perceive the government to be the authority to which they are accountable, virtually to the exclusion of all others. In short, freedom of education is perceived by Catholic schools far too much as the end of the battle, and not enough as an opportunity for reinvigorating their mission and educational endeavor. Thus, the religious erosion that has been happening for several decades already evokes widespread embarrassment or shyness today among teachers, leaders, and governors of Catholic schools.

In summary, although there is a widely dispersed and highly esteemed network of Catholic schools in the Netherlands, teachers, leaders, and governors appear to be rather uncomfortable with the Catholicity and religious identity of their schools. This embarrassment presents itself in issues such as the connection of the schools to the Church, or the subject of religious education. It is articulated as a 'mental de-pillarisation' (Huyse 1987) or 'de-animation' (van de Donk 2001):

the organizational infrastructure is still there, but the religious spirit seems to have left the organization.

Given the situation of Catholic schools in the Netherlands described above, the question arises: what can teachers, school leaders, and governors possibly do to reverse the trend of religious erosion? The issue is highly problematic, in terms of their striving for the religiously inspired endeavor of the humanization of man and the world and the formation of the person as a whole. ‘Religious erosion’ refers to the awareness of transcendence being very much under pressure, especially in terms of the interplay between the world and a transcendent actor – God.

To answer the question, it is first necessary to develop a coherent and convincing vision of the educational endeavor in the current situation, and then look for appropriate strategies for changing the situation.

2. Theoretical Considerations

In this section, a practical, relevant vision is developed for the educational endeavor of Catholic schools in the contemporary circumstances. This is done by presenting, first, theological considerations regarding points of application of transcendence in the contemporary world; and second, pedagogical considerations pertaining to the transcendent dimension of education and teaching. The theological and pedagogical considerations are then brought together in a critical dialogue, with a view to producing a practical, relevant vision that could enable teachers, leaders, and governors of Catholic schools to turn the tide of religious erosion.

2.1. Theological Considerations for Religion in the Contemporary World

From a contemplative perspective on theology, the Dutch Catholic theologian Erik Borgman (2006) aims not so much to explain phenomena such as religion, secularization, and modern culture, as to deal with them heuristically. He inquires how the sacred is revealed in the world, and reflects on how God manifests Himself in it. Because God and salvation are assumed to be already present in the world – albeit in a veiled and fragmentary way – the world is an invitation to live receptively from what arises. The world is considered a *locus theologicus*; that is, constitutively part of the event of God’s salvation. Religion “eventually emerges as imaginative dealing with the world that is evoked by the sacred in the world, and that through this imagination, reveals this sacredness” (Borgman 2006, 67; my own translation).

Borgman (2017) perceives the world as full of situations in which people take care of each other, work for a living, educate children, and flee to find a safer place to live. From a contemplative perspective, in these situations, fullness is detected rather

than hollowness, abundance instead of scarcity, excess rather than shortage. If one is open to this fullness, abundance, and excess, a new reality burgeons in which traces of God's grace and promise can be seen. The new reality invites people to be committed to devotion and dedication. By consistently using a contemplative perspective as a heuristic, Borgman perceives the world, modern culture, and human action as deposits of God's grace and salvation, and religion as a way to bring them to the surface, allow them to breathe and strengthen them.

Religion opens the possibility of discovering that God's grace and salvation can come to light, and also that God can make all things new without abandoning what is old (Borgman 2020). It can especially be found in what the modern culture of malleability, management, and control marginalizes: experiences of dependency, contingency, and vulnerability. Religion aims not to smoothen these experiences but to ground them in the heart of the individual, and deal with them imaginatively. When this happens, transcendence can come to light. Experiences of dependency, contingency, and vulnerability, and the possibility that transcendence will come to light, interrupt the carefully constructed story of modern understanding of oneself, the other, and the world in terms of malleability, management, and control. From a contemplative perspective, religion reminds one not to put these experiences aside, but to focus on them in order to promote a sensitivity and awareness of transcendence.

In short, from a contemplative perspective on theology, religion is perceived as a phenomenon that emerges as an imaginative dealing with the world and what arises in it in order to live on and be committed to God's grace and salvation. Religion is not intended to bring about God's grace and salvation, but to bring them to the surface, allowing them to breathe and strengthen them. Possible traces of transcendence can be found by being open to and interpreting one's experiences of dependency, contingency, and vulnerability.

2.2. Pedagogical Considerations for Education and Teaching

Nowadays, educational practice is dominated by theories of constructivism, which involves the idea that students must construct their insights, understandings, and knowledge by themselves. This dominance has led to a significant change, accelerating a shift from teaching to learning and promoting the idea of teaching as facilitating, supporting, or scaffolding student learning (Biesta 2013). In many countries (including the Netherlands), resistance to this dominance is discernible, inspired by the longing to ground an existential pedagogy in the heart of the educational endeavor. From an existential perspective on pedagogy (Meirieu 2007; Biesta 2013), the emergence of the human person coming into the world lies at the heart of the educational endeavor. Education aims to awaken the desire in students to take a mature approach to the world. The educational task "consists in arousing the desire in

another human being for wanting to exist in and with the world in a grown-up way, that is *as subject*” (Biesta 2017, 7).

The task can be understood in terms of a dialogue. Students are invited to listen to what or who is calling them to be responsive and to take up their responsibility and be responsible for the social and natural other. To a large extent, the elusiveness of the call and the unenforceability of responses to their initiatives make the emergence of the human person uncertain, and the striving for it a risky enterprise. In such circumstances, education cannot be thought of as strong, secure, or predictable; rather, the educational way is slow, difficult, and subtle.

To understand the existential perspective on education as well as on teaching, the notion of transcendence is crucial. It is closely related to the indispensable role of the other for its coming into the world. In line with Levinas, Gert Biesta (2013, 43–58) identifies the other not simply as another person or subject that resembles oneself, but as the Other that transcends the self – either as a teacher (another person from whom one can learn) or as a transcendent actor: God. The latter can be understood as the secular ‘being among beings’ but also as the religious ‘beyond being.’ From a secular perspective, the introduction of God as the Other ‘beyond being’ interrupts the fundamental incompleteness of human thinking. From a religious perspective, this introduction refers to the possibility that a transcendent actor might ‘break through’ by means of new insights. Both the secular and the religious understanding of the other are seen as invitations to education to be open to the interruption – without guarantee of success. The role of the teacher is not simply to identify with the Other and its authority, but to awaken a sensitivity and awareness of transcendence in education. However, teachers cannot be sure of the results of their teaching regarding the ‘coming into the world.’ It is out of their hands, but they must “take the idea and possibility of revelation seriously, as both a religious and a secular concept. In doing this I have tried to suggest that transcendence cannot be contained to the other as another human being. As soon as one brings transcendence in, one has to take it seriously all the way down – or perhaps we should say, all the way ‘up.’” (Biesta 2013, 56).

By placing the emergence of the human person into the world at its heart, the educational endeavor becomes something that is not at one’s disposal; it transcends one’s actions. It is about the Other who comes from the outside and adds, rather than just confirming what is already there. Students are dependent on the Other that transcends their selves for their coming into the world, and teachers should bring transcendence into their thinking and realization of teaching. By interrupting, teachers can awaken a sensitivity and awareness of transcendence in their students.

2.3. A Practical Vision Relevant for the Educational Endeavor

In this section, a practical vision relevant for the educational endeavor of Catholic schools is developed, on the basis of what is called the critical-dialogical convergence model between theology and pedagogy (Nipkow 1975, 173–77). The convergence is considered critical-dialogical, which means that pedagogical considerations may be criticized from a theological perspective and vice versa.

Catholic schools should be understood first and foremost as pedagogical communities in which educational practices are primordial and essential. Educational practices are never only to attain certain educational goals; they always have more distant aims. They are less about the transfer of knowledge, and far more aimed at the formation of a person – understood as transformation – through being addressed and interrupted by the Other. Because of their religious affiliation, Catholic schools are expected to understand their educational practices not only in terms of the other, transcendence and a risky enterprise but more specifically in terms of meaning in life ‘beyond’ inner-worldly connections.

What is to be done for Catholic schools to enable them to formulate a vision for their educational practices in terms of meaning ‘beyond’ inner-worldly connections? Educational practices come first; and a vision story, in which schools give meaning (in a secular and religious sense) to their practices, comes second. Therefore, Catholic schools should first enhance their educational practices for students to encounter the Other and be interrupted. This can be done by developing and realizing educational activities such as encounters with other people with whom students may not be familiar (for example the elderly, migrants, homeless people, or people from another socio-economic, cultural, or religious background), as well as educational activities in which teachers interrupt students’ desires, focus their attention on something outside their known territory, slow down their experiences and feelings of dependency, contingency, and vulnerability by inviting them to write about them or support them in persevering in areas where they experience difficulty.

Second, Catholic schools should identify these encounters and other educational activities as warmly welcomed interruptions. Interruptions are invitations to ask oneself what is happening and how it can be interpreted. The encounters and activities interrupt people’s understanding of themselves, the other and the world, cause them to realize that their previous understanding is inadequate and awaken the longing for a new understanding. Identifying encounters as interruptions promotes the transformation of students (and of teachers too); they are no longer the people they were previously.

Third, Catholic schools should enhance the imaginative interpretation of interruptions, to encourage students to come to new insights and possibilities. Imaginative interpretation is boosted with the help of stories. To interpret the emergence of insights in terms of ‘beyond being,’ religious stories in the form of biblical narratives

(for example) are indispensable (Ricoeur 1995). Religious stories speak of the world in a non-descriptive, poetic way. In so doing they create a textural world for those who listen to them to figure out the identity of the transcendent and be able to speak God's name. God's name is not presented directly but is disclosed or revealed through the interpretation of the story. By interpreting themselves 'in front of' these stories, people can religiously make sense of events in which they are interrupted. (They do however risk their self-understanding and transformation, in a religious sense.)

Fourth, Catholic schools should tell their stories of encounters (and other educational activities) as warmly welcomed practices of being interrupted and interrupting, bear witness to their transformative character, and include the notion of transcendence in thinking about them. Put differently, Catholic schools are invited to relate their educational practices in such a manner as to encourage students to take a mature approach to the world, as a story of transformation through being addressed and interrupted by transcendence – in not only a secular but (even more) in a religious sense.

Bringing together the theological and pedagogical considerations in a critical-dialogical convergence, the vision of Catholic schools for their educational endeavor should be understood in terms of interruption, the other, and transcendence. Educational practices of being interrupted by and interrupting the other will encourage new insights and make it possible for transcendence to emerge. This emergence could be in a secular as well as a religious sense. In the contemporary societal context of secularization, individualization, and diversity, however, the emergence of transcendence is not evident, and certainly not in religious terms. In this context, new strategies must be developed to awaken the sensitivity to and awareness of transcendence. This shall be addressed in the next section.

3. New Strategies to Awaken the Awareness of Transcendence

In this section, two new clusters of strategies for awakening the awareness of transcendence are presented. First, a newly developed cluster of strategies is described that Catholic schools as pedagogical communities could use to understand their educational endeavor in terms of transcendence. Second, a newly developed cluster of strategies for teachers, school leaders, and governors is presented to be employed for the interpretation of their professional endeavor likewise.

3.1. New Strategies for Catholic Schools

The first cluster of strategies relates to the understanding and realization of the educational endeavor, and involves discernment strategies for prospectively reflecting on developments and events in order to decide what is to be done about them.

Discernment strategies involve activities to enable prospective reflection when developments or events interrupt the current praxis of schools and to establish what to do about them. Catholic schools in Western European countries face many issues; for example, students' declining motivation to study and learn, falling attendance at religious services in school, and the erosion of religious education. Events related to these issues interrupt both the daily praxis of Catholic schools and even more so their carefully constructed narratives of good education. From a systemic perspective, schools may take an instrumental approach to these interruptions, by shrinking back from issues and attempting to apply the current narrative (Bakker and Montessori 2016). They may try harder by using 'repair' strategies, for example by insisting to students and others that attending religious services is obligatory. They could also opt for strategies to develop or extend the current system further, for example by expanding school protocols on student behavior. Through these instrumental strategies, interruptions are set aside and dealt with, though the issues may well be solved in the short term.

What better strategies could Catholic schools employ to interpret interruptions wisely, in order to strive purposefully for their educational endeavor? The Christian tradition comprises various practices that include activities for living well, with and for others, with a view to the ultimate good. In this tradition, 'discernment' means the paradigm of receptive and critical reflection, deliberation, and judgment in a specific situation in order to strive for the ultimate good (Waaijman 2002). Although the Christian tradition encompasses various forms of discernment practice, they can all be characterized by four core qualities, each containing a cluster of various strategies for action: to look outwards, to look inwards, to deliberate with others, and to decide what to do. By using these strategies, Catholic schools can establish what to do with a view to the realization of their educational endeavor. Recently, the core features of a communal discernment practice for Catholic schools are developed that contain these clusters of strategies (van der Zee 2023).

A crucial feature of the discernment practice is to open up a situation for deliberation. Through deliberating, new insights may be discovered into what could possibly be done in response to what is happening or what has happened. Deliberation is not about having a debate; it means gathering around an issue and building an open dialogue to find new possibilities. To generate new possibilities, deliberation must use a contemplative gaze; that is, the desire to make sense of developments or events from the perspective of transcendence (Delbecq et al. 2004). A possible way to enable practicing a contemplative gaze is to introduce utopian stories that mediate a draft for a possible world as it would be if the future was in God's hands. A utopian story is one that interrupts the present situation: "The result of reading a utopia is that it puts into question what presently exists; it makes the actual world seem strange ... [and] introduces a sense of doubt that shatters the obvious" (Ricoeur 1986, 299). By reading the developments or events in front of utopian stories, new insights and

possibilities can break through. If one is open to such a breakthrough, the idea and possibility of revelation are taken seriously, and the awareness of transcendence is awakened. However, the awakening is to be understood in terms of uncertainty and unenforceability and has no guarantees.

In short, Catholic schools can use discernment strategies to handle societal developments and events that interrupt their current praxis and invite them to address their educational endeavor. By using these strategies, schools are not setting interruptions aside; on the contrary, they see them as welcome opportunities to reinvigorate their educational endeavor. When using deliberation strategies, schools do not jump to predictable or rationally derived conclusions but open themselves up to unexpected new possibilities. By consistently using these strategies and developing a robust practice of discernment strategies, Catholic schools increase their openness to a transcendent breakthrough – in a religious sense.

3.2. New Strategies for Teachers, School Leaders, and Governors

The second cluster of strategies relates to the professional endeavor of teachers, leaders, and governors of Catholic schools, and involves strategies to open themselves up to interruptions in their personal and professional lives, and be able to interpret them as invitations to reconsider their personal and professional story.

Traditionally, Catholic schools in the Netherlands were populated by teachers, school leaders, and governors (as well as students) who identify themselves as Catholics. In contemporary times of religious diversity and erosion, it seems an impossible mission to recruit new colleagues who both define themselves as Catholics and are actively involved in the religious practices of the Catholic Church. The growing shortage of teachers and school leaders has made the situation even worse. What would be a fruitful strategy for inviting teachers, school leaders, and governors to commit themselves to the religiously inspired and oriented educational endeavor of Catholic schools? It is well known that personal biography is an important source for the stories that people tell about their professional lives (Kelchtermans 1994; Sugrue 2012). In their professional story, everyone gives meaning to developments or events that arise, interrupt their story, and challenge them to re-tell it. Developments or events interrupt because they are contingent; that is, it is understood that they are not necessary, but they are also not impossible. They can be experienced as positive (receiving new opportunities, giving birth) or as negative (losing one's job, or a loved one).

Modern life makes contingency even more complicated. In a world in which people can control and design their own lives to a large extent, dealing with and attributing meaning to uncertainty and uncontrollability has become a challenge for people, in both their personal and professional lives. Kurt Wuchterl (2011) proposed three modes for handling experiences of contingency, namely control, acceptance,

and encounter. 'Control' refers to the denial of the contingency of the event. People then interpret the event in terms of rational reasons. 'Acceptance' refers to the acknowledgment that there is no reason that sufficiently explains the occurrence of the event. People interpret the event by posing existential questions. 'Encounter' is the third mode of handling contingency: the contingent life event is experienced as an encounter with a transcendent reality that is other-than-reason. The interpretation of the occurrence of contingent life events can therefore be seen as a promising point of departure for enhancing the awareness of transcendence.

In the past few years, research has been conducted among (future) teachers, leaders, and governors of Catholic schools in the Netherlands not only to find out more about these modes for handling contingent life events but also about the possible impact on their actions as professionals (van den Brand 2016; van der Zee 2019; Copier, Hermans, and van der Zee 2020; Copier 2023; Bastiaansen 2023). All three modes of handling contingency may be used in response to various positive and negative contingent life events.

It has been suggested that the 'encounter' mode should be redefined into a mode of 'receiving,' in order to better understand what is happening in the handling process. 'Receiving' refers to a process: first, accepting the new reality that is created by the occurrence of the event, and second, deriving new insights from the encounter with this new reality that transcends the human framework, and extracting new possibilities from that encounter (Copier 2023, 78–92). The redefined mode includes an understanding of transcendence in both a secular and a religious sense. Various teachers, school leaders, and governors understand the receiving of new insights in a religious sense, that is: as a gift from transcendence. Research has also provided evidence that the mode of handling contingency experiences is related to professional action. For example, school leaders who have received contingency appear to be more willing to express educational aims that leave an openness for what comes from outside and transcends rational human understanding (Copier 2023, 93–112). Future teachers who have received contingency appear to be more open to using teaching strategies that understand the striving for the personal formation of students in terms of transcendence (Bastiaansen 2023).

In short, by interpreting their contingent life events, (future) teachers, school leaders, and governors are invited to reconsider and re-tell the narratives they tell about their personal and professional lives. This invitation increases the possibility of receiving new insights that come from the outside and that transcend rational human understanding, and subsequently awaken their sensitivity and awareness of transcendence. The interest of researchers in inviting people to interpret contingent events lies in the relationship with their professional actions. If their awareness of receiving contingency grows, it will stimulate them to include transcendence when formulating future aims or selecting teaching strategies. The invitation to interpret contingent life events and to re-tell their story includes fruitful strategies

to foster the sensitivity and awareness of transcendence. But again, no guarantees can be given.

Conclusion and Discussion

Secularization and religion are phenomena that mutually influence each other on a societal, community, and personal level. Although the secularization thesis wanted people to believe that religion would disappear, it is still emerging as an imaginative dealing with the world and making sense of life in terms of the interplay between the world and a transcendent actor, God. Secularization does not necessarily imply a loss of awareness of transcendence but could mean the restriction of transcendence to inner-worldly connections. Awareness of transcendence, therefore, is seen as a promising point of departure – not only to understand secularization, religion, and their mutual interplay, but also to design new strategies for dealing with these phenomena.

In this article, the awareness of transcendence in the context of Catholic schools in the Netherlands is explored and these institutions strive for a religiously inspired and religiously oriented educational endeavor. Catholic schools are faced with serious challenges, relating to a religious erosion that has taken place over the past few decades. These challenges involve not only their understanding of themselves as religiously affiliated schools, but also how they deal with issues that emerge from developments and events such as the decline of student motivation, falling attendance at religious services, and the erosion of the subject of religious education. Shrinking back from these issues or using ‘repair’ strategies to turn the tide appears not to be effective at all. New strategies are needed that stem from a Catholic vision of the educational endeavor, in terms of interruption, the other, and transcendence, and that align with “renewed consciousness of the hunger of the human heart that only Transcendence can satisfy” (Groome 1998, 323).

Two new clusters of strategies are presented with a view to enhancing the sensitivity and awareness of transcendence. Both clusters aim to increase an openness that is closely related to an awareness of transcendence in both a secular and a religious sense (Hermans 2020). At the community level, a cluster of deliberation strategies is presented to be used to come to new insights and possibilities that can be seen as a breakthrough. At the individual level, a cluster of interpretive strategies is presented for addressing contingent events (in both personal and professional life) in such a way as to receive new insights and derive new possibilities. Both clusters of strategies encourage an openness to receiving new insights and possibilities – not in a secure, manageable, and predictable way, but in a subtle, patient, and receptive way. By interpreting the receipt of new insights and the transformation that is caused by

them against the backdrop of religious stories, meaning can be discovered ‘beyond’ inner-worldly connections. By doing this, Catholic schools allow “... access to truths that transcend the mere data of the empirical and rational sciences, in order to open up to the whole of truth so as to respond to the deepest questions of the human soul that do not only concern immanent reality” (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022, no. 20).

Findings from empirical research provide evidence that school leaders who receive new insights and possibilities from personal experiences of contingency appear to formulate transcendentally-oriented educational aims (Copier 2023, 71–87), and future teachers appear to use teaching strategies with a view to personal formation in terms of transcendence (Bastiaansen 2023). These findings must be evaluated further in future research; however, they are promising in terms of designing new ways to awaken sensitivity to and the awareness of transcendence in the religiously motivated educational endeavor of Catholic schools. In this regard, it should be noted that the use of these newly developed clusters of strategies will go against the dominant grain of secure, predictable, and risk-free education, of which Catholic schools are a part. Thus, one should not be overly optimistic but plan to take friction, conflict, and confusion into account. The strategies presented here commit to an educational approach of slowing down, receiving no guarantees, accepting risks, and being open to what arises. This approach, based on a Catholic vision of education, is worth exploring further in terms of its implications and impact – not only on the educational practice of Catholic schools, but also on how the new generation of students – from a religious perspective – will come into and deal with the world, and discover their ultimate destiny (Giussani 2019).

Translated by Dave Buchanan

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