

# Learning to Live with Religious Plurality in Personhood Formation

Siebren Miedema  
VU University Amsterdam

Every person has a more or less articulated worldview that I define in its most brief form as “a view on life”. That might be a religious view and could be with or without a God-concept, but the religious domain forms a sub-domain of the embracing domain of worldview. We can make a distinction between organized and personal worldviews. I will argue that pedagogically speaking schools should be aware of the value and relevance of worldview education especially focusing on the development of the students’ personal worldview as an integral part of their personhood formation (“Bildung”). Worldview and/or religion are part of the public and the social domain, although not undisputed, and that is why I make a plea for worldview education as part of citizenship education. Already in the school as an embryonic society (John Dewey) students should learn to live together with differences and this should also include the ability to recognize differences between worldview/religious. The results of empirical research projects in the Netherlands and also from a European Commission granted project “Religion in Education” have shown that students really want to learn from and are interested in the worldview of their fellow students. They are also in favor of schools where they can meet a diversity of worldviews among teachers and students. Dialogue and encounter are important to them. So, worldview education as part of citizenship education can foster students to learn to live peacefully together.

*Keywords:* personhood formation, worldview education, citizenship education, living together, diversity

## 1. Introduction

During the last decade, great thinkers like Jürgen Habermas have addressed the importance of religion in the public sphere. In liberal-democratic societies, according to Habermas, mutual learning processes and dialogue between religious and secular citizens should flourish. The state needs to take a positive stance towards the contributions of religious communities and persons in the public domain because they can provide secular society with important and necessary sources for attributing and creating meaning (Habermas 2001; 2005; Habermas and Ratzinger 2005).

It is my contention that the personhood formation of students should be the core pedagogical aim of every educational institution. The practices of such institutions including as well as the professional practices of the teachers can be analyzed in term of hindering or contributing to that aim. So, the following theoretical and empirical research question is always leading for me: “What is the impact of the schools’ supply in terms of the

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Siebren Miedema, Full Professor, Emeritus Dr., Department of Research and Theory in Education and Department of Praxis, VU University Amsterdam, Netherlands; main research fields: Educational Foundations, Religious, and Worldview Education. Email: s.miedema@vu.nl.

selected subject-matter and of the arrangement of pedagogical relations and situations by the professionals on the personhood formation, including the worldview identity development of students?”

The events of “9/11” in New York and the murder of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam by a radical Muslim in November 2004 have affected tremendously the debates on the place and role of religion in societies and education. All this confirmed my view that education and in particular schools in the Netherlands, in Europe (Jackson et al. 2007), and worldwide could really make a difference when it comes to trying to prevent religious fundamentalism and radicalism. Schools should foster religious or worldview citizenship education in which encounter and dialogue have a prominent place, and by which students should learn to live together while at the same time leaving space for being different from a social, cultural, and religious, or worldview background. Multi-religious or interreligious education is the real necessity in the 21st century! When the non-practicing Jewish mayor of the city of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, in his New Year’s Address 2002 called on people not to underestimate the binding role of religion and to give more attention to it in the public domain, I felt this as a strong support of my view. He said:

For a long time the government in this country (the Netherlands, S. M.) has not paid attention to the role of religion: the separation of church and state is deservedly well thought-off with us. But the question is whether the government, though in compliance with the doctrine of that separation, should not be a better judge of the role of religion, just because it does play such an important role as binding agent. If we want to keep the dialogue between each other going, then we also need to take into account the religious infrastructure. Without mosques, temples, churches and synagogues we will not succeed. (a Dutch quality newspaper 01-04-02)

His statement implies that citizenship education is the responsibility of each country’s government. It is my view that if governments want to take responsibility for an *inclusive concept* of citizenship education, this should imply that they take the political-pedagogical responsibility to stimulate the policy of and practice in schools to foster religious or worldview citizenship education as an integral component of citizenship education. At the same time such governments should abstain from any preference for a particular worldview or religion, but should guarantee the political constellation in which religious/worldview citizenship education can flourish at the benefit of children and young people. This would provide students with the opportunity to experience, to be confronted by and become acquainted with other students’ religious/worldview background, ideas, experiences, and practices already in the embryonic or mini society of the school as John Dewey has stated it so adequately. Seeing the impact of the religious domain on political, cultural, and economic areas, students can also benefit from such experiences and insights when they encounter religious “others” in society at large. Such practices might bring about mutual respect and understanding and should stimulate the development of the personal religious identity formation of students. Thus, the pedagogical, the political, and the theological, or religious studies perspectives can and should adequately meet here.

## **2. Religion/Worldview in the Secular Age**

Charles Taylor (2007) has pointed to the secular age in a very particular sense, that is, with a focus on the conditions of belief. This form of secularity focuses on:

a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace. [...] Secularity in this sense is a matter of the whole context of understanding (i.e., matters explicitly formulated by almost everyone, such as the plurality of options, and some which form the implicit, largely unfocussed background of this experience and this search) in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place. (3)

Most people are looking and longing for meaning in life is a characteristic of our secular age, Taylor (2007) says. Their pilgrimage should be taken seriously. It is important to encourage them to pursue their search to the end and to facilitate their journey, while also taking into account the plurality of spiritual choices people make (see interview with Taylor in Jacobs and Overdijk 2011, 311-312).

Educators and religious educators have to face this challenge explicitly now from the aim of religious identity formation of pupils. It is my contention that here we need to reflect anew on the different modes of exploration, commitment, and participation that might result from religious or worldview education in schools, but also distinguish more adequately between belief, faith, and worldview if we want to do justice to what Taylor has convincingly characterized as “options.”

That is one of the reasons why I prefer pedagogically to speak to use the concept “worldview” instead of “religion” with “religion” as a sub-concept of “worldview,” and define it as the system, which is always subjected to changes, of implicit and explicit views, feelings and attitudes of an individual in relation to human life. “Views, feelings and attitudes in relation to human life” can refer to everything with which people can be occupied and consider important to them. In empirical research with students we use a short “stipulative definition,” namely, “A worldview is the way one looks at life” (Bertram-Troost, De Roos, and Miedema 2006).

Using the concept of “worldview” may help us to avoid strong and aversive secularist approaches against religion, which want to leave religion and religious education out of the curriculum of the school completely. Everyone has at least a personal worldview that may or may not be directly influenced by an organized or established worldview or religious tradition. And this personal worldview with its existential layers should pedagogically be taken into account as we have claimed elsewhere (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter, and Miedema 2013). The concept “worldview” can also prevent exclusivist claims leading, for example, to preferential argumentation in paying attention only to one religion, for instance, the Christian one or even to preferring a teaching and learning into approach of a particular worldview or religion. Both cases can be interpreted as universalistic exclusivist worldview or religious claims against, for instance, the universal inclusive or pluralist claim in human rights of self-development and self-appropriation.

### **3. Citizenship Education and Worldview Education**

The late Terrence McLaughlin wrote that it is important to remember that “citizenship” and “education for citizenship” are not abstract notions, but require a concrete specification in relation to a particular society (McLaughlin 1992, 241). McLaughlin’s plea is for interpretation of citizenship education characterized by an emphasis on active learning and inclusion, interactivity, that is values-based and process led, and allowing students to develop and articulate their own views and to engage in debate. That view is fully compatible with religious and worldview education as we outlined earlier when the aim no longer will be taught and learnt into a religion or worldview, but rather combining teaching and learning about religions with teaching and learning from religions and worldviews, thus enabling students to develop their own point of view in matters of religion and worldview in the context of plurality via encounter and dialogue.

In that article, McLaughlin introduced an ideal-typical distinction of what he called a “maximal interpretation of education for citizenship” in contrast to a “minimal interpretation of education for citizenship” (McLaughlin 1992). He himself interpreted these distinctions in terms of contrasting interpretations on the continuum of the very concept of “democratic citizenship.” It was his aim “to offer a substantial notion of ‘education for citizenship’ in the context of the diversity of a pluralistic democratic society;” a notion “...

‘thick’ or substantial enough to satisfy the communal demands of citizenship, yet compatible with liberal demands concerning the development of critical rationality by citizens and satisfaction of the demands of justice relating to diversity” (McLaughlin 1992, 235). Such a society, according to McLaughlin, should seek to find a balance between social and cultural diversity with cohesion. It could have been said in the first decade of the 21st century.

His elaboration on a minimal and maximal approach runs as follows. In the minimal approach to citizenship and education for citizenship the subject is presented in a purely knowledge-based way and with a particular civics-related content to be transmitted in a formal and didactic manner. The identity conferred on an individual in this conception of citizenship is merely seen in formal, legal, and juridical terms. In schools, the development of the students’ broad critical reflection and understanding is neither stimulated nor fostered. A maximal conceptualization of citizenship and education for citizenship, however, is characterized by an emphasis on active learning and inclusion, is interactive, values-based and process led, allowing students to develop and articulate their own opinions and to engage in debate. The individual’s identity in this conception of citizenship is dynamic instead of static, and a matter for continuing debate and redefinition. Maximal conceptions of citizenship education “require a considerable degree of explicit understanding of democratic principles, values and procedures on the part of the citizen, together with the dispositions and capacities required for participation in democratic citizenship generously conceived” (McLaughlin 1992, 237).

McLaughlin observed that the “minimal” interpretation is open to various objections. The most notable is that “it may involve merely an unreflective socialization into the political and social *status quo*, and is therefore inadequate on educational, as well as on other, grounds” (McLaughlin 1992, 238). That is why he was in favor of a maximal conception of education for citizenship, because these require “a much fuller educational program, in which the development of a broad critical understanding and a much more extensive range of dispositions and virtues in the light of a general liberal and political education are seen as crucial” (McLaughlin 1992, 238). But he was not blind to objections against the maximalist interpretation either, because such interpretations “are in danger of presupposing a substantive set of ‘public virtues,’ which may exceed the principled consensus that exists or can be achieved” (McLaughlin 1992, 241).

Although religious/worldview education is not the same as citizenship education, there are fruitful possibilities and there is, in my opinion, also the need to further link these two fields. McLaughlin’s preference for a maximalist interpretation of education for citizenship may be helpful here, because he points to the necessity of full educational programs in which the development of a broad critical understanding and a much more extensive range of dispositions and virtues in the light of a general liberal and political education are seen as crucial. His view on education for citizenship offers the possibility to include religious and worldview education as part of such educational programs and makes it even fuller in combining democratic education for citizenship and religious and worldview education in schools (Miedema 2012). It is my contention that this combination could adequately be coined as “*religious or worldview citizenship education*.” This is fully combinable with what I have claimed elsewhere to be the aim of education in schools, where every child and youngster in every school should be able to develop her or his personal identity or personhood (Wardekker and Miedema 2001). This means that all domains of human potentiality and ability (be they cognitive, creative, moral, religious, expressive, etc.), thus the development of the whole person should be taken into account. Religious edification (“*Bildung*”) is interpreted then as an integral part of an embracing concept of personal identity development. An embracing concept of citizenship education should imply then that religious and

worldview education and development are an inclusive part of citizenship education. It should form a structural and necessary element of all citizenship education in all schools, thus including common or state schools as well as denominational schools, based on a transformative pedagogy stressing the actorship and authorship of the students. In all cases, the aim is the students' *self responsible self-determination* regarding religious/worldview. Dealing explicitly with worldview education and this being the broader term with religious education as its sub-species, from a practical pedagogical point of view schools should give worldview education its own school "space," also because it is better suited to deal with the plurality at stake. Schools with a particular identity (be their public schools or denominational private schools) may also come to the conclusion that forms of cooperation might even be a better way to deal with religious and worldview plurality as we will present in the next part.

It is widely recognized that citizenship education is the responsibility of each country's government in liberal-democratic societies. And if a government should take the responsibility for an inclusive concept of education for citizenship seriously, it means that without any preference *per se* at the side of the government itself for a particular worldview or religion, each government could take the *political-pedagogical responsibility* to stimulate the policy and practice in schools to foster religious or worldview education as part of an integral citizenship education (Doedens and Weisse 1997; Knauth 2007; Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2008). In that way, the state can support democratic citizenship and religious/worldview education definitively combined in schools as religious or worldview citizenship education.

Following the train of thought of the philosopher and pedagogue Dewey (1897/1972; 1916), it is, pedagogically speaking and from a societal perspective, desirable that students already in the embryonic society of the school, or experience are confronted by and should become acquainted with other children's religious backgrounds, ideas, experiences, and practices. Seeing the impact of the religious domain on political, cultural, and economic areas they can also benefit from such experiences and insights when they encounter religious "others" in society at large. So, from a societal as well as pedagogical point of view, all schools should be obliged to foster a religious and/or worldview dimension to citizenship, and thereby bring about mutual respect and understanding and may stimulate the development of the personal religious identity formation of children and youngsters in their school-life (Miedema 2006).

#### **4. Promising Practices**

Examples of good practices of the co-operation of schools with a different religious and/or worldview profile in the Netherlands might also be inspirational for forms of maximal interreligious citizenship education elsewhere in the world. One example in the Netherlands as it was practiced for 10 years is the one and only interreligious primary school we have had, the Juliana van Stolberg Primary School (Ter Avest 2003; 2009). In a similar way this is still concretized and practiced in the state of Hamburg in Germany (Doedens and Weisse 1997). The use of such an approach especially holds when the aim of religious/worldview education no longer is teaching and learning into a religion. Rather, when educating about religions/worldviews, it will be conceptualized as a function of a teaching and learning from religions, that is enabling students to develop their own point of view in matters of religion(s) and worldview(s) in the context of plurality and to develop their own personal religious/worldview identity (Jackson 1997; Wardekker and Miedema 2001). Unfortunately, the Juliana van Stolberg School—that was the only interreligious school in the Netherlands recognized officially by the Dutch government and bringing students from a Christian and Islamic tradition together—was forced to

close down in 2003. The reason for this was that Christian parents no longer sent their children to the school. The school gradually became in practice a “black,” Islamic school, and that was, of course, not what the participants had originally in mind.

Elsewhere, we have extensively dealt with the promising co-operations between schools of different denominations in the “Bijlmer” district in the south-east part of the city of Amsterdam (Miedema and Ter Avest 2011). Here three primary schools belonging to different denominations—that is, a state school, an Islamic school, and an open Christian school, practice what they preach and preach what they practice: living together in difference. In these three schools, the population of teachers as well as those of students and parents represents different nationalities and a variety of religious commitments. The pedagogical approach used here is coined the “Bijlmer Conversations,” emphasizing the need to draw each other into the conversation continuously. Although the teachers play a central role in the “Bijlmer Conversations,” the focus is on the needs of the student who is raised and who will also live in a multicultural and multi-religious society.

The three elementary schools in the Bijlmer have made a decision for close co-operation, because the problematic situation of most of the students in this poorer area of Amsterdam—where more than 70 different national and over 20 denominational backgrounds are represented—was and is perceived by the principals of these three schools as a shared problem, and is forming the main focus of their pedagogical task. In the meetings of the teams, the above mentioned “Bijlmer Conversations,” the teams of the three schools (individually and jointly) develop their own way of responding to the diversity of their student population and the complexity of the acculturation and adjustment of the students. The voice of the teacher, the variety of sources of inspiration, the voice of the student, and the need of the student to be equipped to live alongside one another in the multicultural and multi-religious society, are combined in the pedagogical approach of “learning in difference” of the “Bijlmer Conversations.” The different pedagogical strategies of each of the three teams are rooted in the personal that is religious or secular worldview of the members of the team. Religion(s) is/are seen as something you have to know about and you can learn from, provided that there is a certain sensibility towards, and recognition of, situations and *experiences of awe*; practices that render speechless. Diversity in religious and secular worldviews is seen as a given, as a societal fact, and as a challenge, not as a problem. Creating social cohesion as a network of teachers and parents from different cultural and religious backgrounds is seen as a challenge. For the creation of such networks, each of the partners is of equal importance, or to put it differently: each of the schools is not able to develop its own identity without the contrasting or confronting encounters with the other schools. The slogan of the schools is: *The Plural of Togetherness is Future*. The schools’ characteristic approach to difference is cemented in classroom activities stimulating the development of social competencies, and is related to the respectful encounter of students of different religious backgrounds. Respect and tolerance are a main focus of citizenship education.

Such forms of co-operation could and possibly be realized on a local level in a lot of other countries too in one form or another, with still separate school management and budgetary responsibilities or in the form of a complete joint venture. However, the prerequisite for such practices of interreligious teaching and learning in the school setting is that both the participating denominational schools including the common or state schools interpret religious and/or worldview education as an integral part of an embracing concept of personhood formation, and combine this with a transformative pedagogy that stresses the actorship and authorship of the students (Miedema 2000).

## 5. Conclusion

Earlier I quoted McLaughlin who said that it is important to remember that “citizenship” and “education for citizenship” are not abstract notions, but require concrete specification in relation to a particular society. The same prevails when we add “religious or worldview education” to these two terms. How specific and different particular societies are from a religious/worldview perspective, I especially learned as a member of a consortium of academic philosophers of education and religious educators in the project *Religion in Education: A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European countries* (RED Co). A project that was funded by the European Commission for three years (2006-2009) and carried out by research teams from eight countries across Europe: Estonia, Norway, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Germany, England, and Russia (Jackson et al. 2007; Miedema 2007; Knauth et al. 2008; Valk et al. 2009). Being able to adequately understand a particular niche from a religious/worldview point of view in respect to education presupposes knowledge of and insight in historical, political, educational, theological, economical, and cultural antecedents. It has also made me aware of the historically constructed particularity of the arrangements in my own country: constructed and not fallen from heaven which makes them changeable!

Another remarkable insight based on the results of empirical research projects in the Netherlands and also from this European Commission granted project “Religion in Education” has shown that students really want to learn from and are interested in the worldview of their fellow students. They are also in favor of schools where they can meet a diversity of worldviews among teachers and students. Dialogue and encounter are important to them, and it is their view that knowing more about other religions and worldviews and meeting peers and adults representing other religions and worldviews can diminish fear and anxiety for otherness, difference, or strangeness. It is their contention that worldview education as part of citizenship education in school is of great value and can foster them to learn to live peacefully together and to deal with the plurality of religions and worldviews already in the embryonic society of the school but also later on in society at large.

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