

Article

# Beyond the Split between Formal School Identity and Teachers' Personal Worldviews: Towards an Inclusive (Christian) School Identity

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**Abstract:** Religious diversity within Dutch schools has greatly increased. We carried out an empirical study to offer insights into how secondary school teachers (try to) relate to the formal Protestant Christian identity of their school, the challenges they experience in relation to their own personal worldview, and the recommendations they have to overcome these challenges. In our qualitative study, we interviewed thirty-two teachers from eight different schools. In selecting the schools, we took into account the diversity of Protestant Christian secondary education in the Netherlands. The teachers teach different subjects in a variety of disciplines (languages, creative arts, sciences, et cetera). For many teachers, their personal worldview does not align neatly with the formal religious identity of the school. As a result, teachers experience challenges in relation to, for example, the act of daily worship and (Christian) celebrations. Teachers also experience tensions regarding the extent to which schools could or should be open towards (religious) others. Teachers' advice, among other recommendations, is to create room for an open exchange of views, opinions, and experiences between teachers and principals. Some teachers recommend that their principal reconsider the formal Christian identity of the school and search for another, more inclusive school identity with which everyone involved can better identify.

**Keywords:** school identity; secularization; secondary education; teachers; worldviews

## 1. Introduction

The role of religion/worldview in Christian education has changed in the last decades in the Netherlands. Religious diversity in the school context has greatly increased amongst pupils, teachers, and school leaders [1]. This not only counts for state schools (31.8% of Dutch schools [2]), but also for denominational schools. Denominational schools either adhere to a religious denomination (e.g., Protestant, Catholic, or Islamic) or to a pedagogic 'denomination' (e.g., following the pedagogical conception of Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, or of Dalton education). In the Netherlands, both state schools and denominational schools are fully financed by the government. This growing religious diversity within schools is due to processes of secularization, amongst others. In some parts of the Netherlands (mainly the Northern provinces), many pupils are socialized in 'whateverism' families [3] with roots in a secularized Christianity. In (mainly) the Western provinces, influences of secularization

are supplemented with an increase of children raised in immigrant Christian communities or in Islamic families as a result of labor immigration and processes of family reunion.

Charles Taylor [4] has pointed to the secular age in a very particular sense, that is, with a focus on the conditions of belief. This connotation of the term makes it better understandable what is at stake now in the field of religion and worldview. According to Taylor, 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” (p. 3).

In our contribution, we focus on the impact of secularization on secondary education in Protestant Christian schools in the Netherlands. In 2016–2017, these schools were attended by 21.4% of Dutch pupils (aged 12–18 years) [5]. From earlier research, we know that Christian schools give shape to their religious identity in different ways [6]. What Christian schools see as aims for religious education also differs from school to school [7]. On a theoretical basis, a distinction is made between ‘teaching about religion’, ‘teaching into religion’, ‘teaching from religion’, and ‘teaching of encounter’ (see also [8,9]). In everyday practice in classrooms, these approaches are, however, very often combined [10].

As teachers are very important agents in giving shape to everyday school practices, it is worthwhile investigating what teachers in Protestant Christian schools for secondary education generally want to achieve with the education of pupils. There is hardly any insight into the way teachers express their personal convictions in relation to the Christian tradition of the school in everyday secondary school practice. Regarding primary education, the studies of Van Hardeveld [11] and Bakker and Rigg [12] give important insights. To what degree do these teachers show themselves to be rooted in the Christian tradition? What does the formal religious identity of a school mean to them? In order to answer these questions, we carried out an empirical study [13].

The primary question of the research was: What do teachers in Protestant Christian schools for secondary education generally want to achieve with the education of pupils and what is the impact and influence of, on the one hand, their own worldview, and on the other hand, school policy on what they want to achieve? Several sub questions were formulated as well. In this article, we focus on three of them:

How do teachers (try to) relate to the formal Protestant Christian identity of their school?

What challenges do they experience in doing so?

What recommendations do teachers have for better dealing with these challenges?

Closer insight into how teachers in Christian secondary schools relate to Christianity nowadays, what challenges they meet, and how these challenges can, in their perspective, be dealt with can contribute to views on what teachers in our times need to carry out their profession and how they can be supported in doing so.

In order to answer the three questions, we will first give more information about our empirical study, which consists of eight qualitative case studies including semi-structured interviews with teachers. We will provide descriptions of the participating schools and teachers, with a particular attention to the role of religion/worldview in the schools and in the teachers’ lives. Then, we will focus on challenges teachers experience in relating their own (religious) identity to the (religious) identity of their school. Two challenges are discussed in more detail in order to provide in-depth insights into the dynamics at play as seen through the eyes of teachers. The Results section will contain a description of the recommendations teachers mention. In the conclusion, the research questions will be answered.

## 2. Materials and Methods

To find answers to our research questions, we carried out an empirical, qualitative study. In total, eight schools for secondary education were involved. All these schools were connected

to Verus, the Dutch association of Catholic and Christian education. We interviewed four teachers per school. The 32 teachers teach different subjects in different disciplines. In addition, at all schools, we interviewed a school principal to get a better view of the school as a whole and to get insights into what the school leaders expect from the teachers regarding the education of pupils in relation to the Christian identity of the school. However, in our research, the teachers are central.

### 2.1. Selection of schools

In selecting the schools, we took into account the diversity of Christian secondary education as we found it in earlier research amongst primary schools connected to Verus. Previous research (see [14,15]) on Protestant–Christian primary education in a secular age resulted in a categorization of three types of Christian schools [16]. In the current research, these types are used as a heuristic instrument to select the schools [17].

In short, the descriptions of the three school types run as follows [14] (pp. 211–212):

#### Type 1: Tradition schools

Personal development is very important at our school. A very important aspect of this development is religious education. We find it important to bring our pupils in touch with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our school also thinks that it is important that pupils get knowledge of the Bible and of Christianity.

Practically every day, there is attention for religious education. When we deal with themes related to religious diversity, we will pay attention to the unique position of Christianity. We do not think it is the task of our school to make pupils critical towards their own worldview and background.

During the lessons on religious education, we make use of the methods “Kind op maandag” [Child on Monday] and “Startpunt” [Starting Point] or of our own material. We pay a lot of attention to the choice of these methods; sometimes not only teachers are involved, but also members of the school board and parents. Religious activities have a biblical character and Christian values are central. Our school is mainly attended by Protestant pupils, but there are also unreligious pupils and pupils with other religious backgrounds. Our teachers are mainly Protestant Christian and our principal is actively involved in a religious community. The school finds it very important to maintain a good relationship with the religious communities in the neighborhood or village.

#### Type 2: Diversity schools

At our school, the transmission of skills is very important, just like the contribution to equal chances for pupils in our society. We want to prepare pupils for a life in a multicultural society. Religious education as such is not one of the main educational goals of our school. We do think, however, that it is important that our pupils get in touch with Christianity, mainly because the values which are important in our society are based on Christianity.

The composition of the neighborhood in which the school is situated has quite some influence on how we give shape to our identity. The fact that our school had officially a Christian background does only play a small role in how we deal with this and other themes we are confronted with. Our school pays attention to religious education mainly in separated lessons, which are given at least a few times a week. In the lessons, we pay a lot of attention to world religions and societal questions. As our method, we mainly use “Trefwoord” [Catchword] and “Kind op Maandag” [Child on Monday].

Religious diversity is appreciated positively. At our school, there is the possibility to meet worldviews on the basis of equality and to learn from each other. We see the diversity of worldviews as an opportunity for learning. At our school, there are pupils with diverse religious and secular backgrounds.

There is also diversity in relation to ethnic background. Our team can also be religiously diverse. Also, teachers with a secular, Muslim, or Hindu background can work at our school.

#### Type 3: Meaning-oriented schools

Our school attaches great value to balanced attention to the education (“Bildung” [edification]) of pupils in all domains. We think it is important to stimulate development and cooperation, to help children learn to think for themselves, and to be open towards others. Meaning-making is an important topic that gets a lot of attention in religious education. We teach our pupils to relate to different worldviews from their own (Christian) background. At our school, teachers pay attention to religious education, in a separate subject, nearly every day. Sometimes, there is also attention paid to aspects of religious education in other subject areas. In the religious activities, mainly Christian values are central. However, the character of the activities can also be more biblical. As our method, we mainly use “Kind op Maandag” [Child on Monday] and “Trefwoord” [Catchword]. Our school has pupils with a Protestant background, but there are also unreligious pupils and pupils with other religious backgrounds. With regard to ethnicity, the pupil population is practically homogeneous. Teachers at our school mainly have a Christian background, but it is also possible for teachers with nonreligious or other religious backgrounds to work at our school.

We do not have any empirical evidence on the precise distribution of these three types in secondary education. On the basis of our current research, it is neither possible to say something about that. Experiences with the broad educational field, however, show that the three types are not present in practice to the same extent. The amount of tradition schools appears to be very small, especially in secondary education. Therefore, the eight selected schools should not be seen as representative of Dutch Christian secondary education. However, given that our aim is to depict teachers in the full range of current Christian secondary education in the Netherlands and the great diversity we find there, the choice for these participating schools is legitimate (Reflecting on research sampling, Béraud [18] states that “It is in fact often an illusion to try and respect” the principle of representativeness; researchers do not systematically have exhaustive, precise lists (which makes it difficult to generate a random selection of those to be surveyed) and the characteristics of the reference population are not always known (. . . .) and helpful in our qualitative explorative study.

## 2.2. Selection of Teachers

After the school leaders gave their permission to participate in the study, an interview appointment was made. After this interview, we asked the school leader for the names of teachers who we could ask to participate in the research. In doing so, we explicitly asked for teachers who together represent a wide variety of worldviews and opinions. In addition to that, we made it clear that our aim was to include teachers from different disciplines. Our aim was to have one teacher per school from each of the following clusters (so in total, four teachers per school):

- Religion/Worldview/Philosophy;
- Physical Education, Health Care, Dance, Music, Drama, Arts;
- Biology, Geography, Science, Chemistry;
- Dutch, English, German, French, History, Sociology.

Besides asking the school leaders for names of teachers, we also actively recruited teachers ourselves. In the staff rooms of the participating schools, we distributed cards to encourage interest in our study. In addition, we approached teachers present in the staff room. If a teacher was willing to participate, an interview appointment was made as soon as possible.

In general, the recruitment of teachers was a smooth process. Teachers appeared to very much appreciate the sincere attention of the researchers to the way they practice their profession and what is important to them. They also seemed to enjoy the opportunity to speak with a relative outsider on their position within the school.

## 2.3. Interviews

For the interviews, we used a semi structured questionnaire (see, e.g., [19]) consisting of three categories of questions. The first category deals with questions about the teacher as a person

(with questions on one's worldview, motivation to work at the particular school, and the connection between them). The second category of questions deals with the teacher's views on education and professionalism. The third category deals with questions on how one perceives the school and how the teacher gives shape to his/her own professionalism within the context of the particular school. This last category includes questions on whether teachers are of the opinion that there is enough room within the school context to speak about and act from one's own life conviction, and what teachers perceive as challenging with regard to this. We also asked teachers what could be done to deal with these challenges.

Interviews took place at the school in a separate meeting room or in an empty classroom. Interviews took around 50 minutes per participant. After consent was given by the interviewees, integral audio recordings were made of the interviews [20]. Afterwards, the interviews were completely transcribed verbatim. The verbatim texts were imported into Atlas-Ti, a computer program for qualitative analysis [21]. Codes were, in an iterative process, assigned to the different text parts. These codes summarize the content of the concerned text passage and/or indicate the subject of the text parts. By connecting these codes to the research questions, and by combining different text parts to which the same codes were assigned, we obtained insights into recurring answering patterns and themes which were important to the teachers. In the team of researchers, the preliminary findings and interpretations were discussed and reflected upon in order to come to a joint answer to the research questions [20].

### 3. Results

On the basis of the interviews with both school principals and several teachers, we present short descriptions or vignettes of the eight schools which participated in our research (see also [22] (p. 161–166)). In these descriptions, information from websites and/or school guides are also included. The descriptions mainly focus on the religious dimension of the school identity, as this dimension is most relevant to our research questions.

We chose to use fictitious names for the schools [23]. Also, the real names of the school principals and teachers involved were not used. The locations of the schools are described in a very broad sense in order to make sure that the schools are not directly traceable.

#### 3.1. Short Descriptions of the Schools

##### 3.1.1. Alting College

Alting College is located in a middle-sized city outside the urban agglomeration of the Netherlands. There are about 1600 pupils [24]. The school offers education at different levels, running from lower vocational education to gymnasium.

This Christian school has an open admission policy of pupils. However, it is expected that they respect and participate in religious activities. There are a few pupils with a migrant background, most of whom are Muslims. Only some girls wear a veil.

This school advocates a view on education in which pupils and teachers as human beings are central. Compassion and care for one another are characteristic. These characteristics are explicitly linked to the Christian identity of the school. The Gospel is an important source of inspiration at the school. Teachers are expected to represent this Christian identity. Preferably, teachers are involved with a church, but this is no obligation. In practice, by no means do all teachers attend church services regularly or even call themselves Christians.

In Religious Education, different worldviews are addressed. An important aim of the lessons is, according to the RE teacher, to let pupils discover what is important or 'sacred' to them and what their own sources of inspiration are.

### 3.1.2. Bonhoeffer College

Bonhoeffer College is situated in the urban agglomeration. This gymnasium is attended by about 800 pupils. Pupils are mainly born in wealthy Dutch families. Most of the pupils do not have a Christian background.

The school has Protestant Christian roots, with a very broad character. There are many non-Christian teachers. No more than 25% are in some way connected to a church. Also, teachers from different religions or worldviews can work at the school. An Islamic teacher with a head scarf would, according to the school principal, not be a problem 'as long as the Sharia will not be preached'. The school board expects teachers to conform to the way the school relates to Christianity. Teachers are asked to read from the Bible daily.

Teachers get a lot of freedom to give shape to their lessons. The expertise of teachers is highly valued.

The RE lessons focus on knowledge about religions and life issues from different perspectives. Christianity is seen as an important source for norms and values. In other lessons, such as history, languages, culture, and music, Christianity is addressed in order to help pupils to understand the Western culture.

### 3.1.3. Calvijn College

This school is situated in a small town in the so-called Dutch 'bible-belt', the regions with a lot of orthodox Christians. About 2000 pupils attend this school. School levels which are offered run from lower general secondary education to gymnasium.

There are mainly pupils with a Dutch, Christian background. About two-thirds of the parents of the pupils are members of the Dutch Protestant Church. The other third are members of other Protestant (more orthodox/strict) churches. It is obliged that parents are church members.

The school has Dutch Reformed foundations. The aim is to guide pupils, from a perspective of uniqueness, on their way to the broader society.

Teachers who want to work at Calvijn College are obliged to agree with the 'three forms of unity' (religious documents which historically form the theological and confessional basis of the reformed churches in the Netherlands). It is, amongst other things, not accepted by the school board that teachers cohabit unmarried or become a member of an evangelical church. It is not allowed to practice homosexuality and women teachers are obliged to wear skirts.

The aim of Religious Education is not to evangelize, to proselytize, or to convert the pupils. However, it is important that pupils learn to know 'the lord Jesus Christ'. The RE teacher emphasizes that school is not a church. He wants to enlarge the focus of the pupils by stimulating them to discuss relevant societal issues.

Christianity plays a role in all aspects of the school. All teachers discuss Christianity in relation to their school subjects. It is important that the Christian identity of the school is not only expressed in the morning prayers and celebrations, but also in different school subjects. Christianity is also expressed in social relations, because pupils and teachers are seen as creatures of God.

### 3.1.4. Da Costa College

Da Costa College is situated in a wealthy, middle-sized village in the middle of the Netherlands. There are about 1500 pupils at the school. Education is offered from lower general secondary education to athenaeum (higher secondary education). Many pupils come from socioeconomic middle-class families. At the lower school level, about 20% of the pupils have a migrant background. Church attendance of teachers, parents, and pupils alike is low. Parents are asked to respect the Christian identity of the school. All pupils are obliged to take part in religious activities such as the Christmas celebration. Muslim pupils are not given permission to have a prayer room. There will, however, be a public silence room.

In the formal expressions of the religious identity of the school, it is stated that the school has an 'inclusive worldview' and that every human being is part of God's world. In this view, room for personal development is very important.

To work at the school, teachers need to subscribe to and represent the Christian identity. Those who do not relate to Christianity in any sense, can—in principal—not work at the school, unless the need for hiring certified teachers is very high. It would be accepted that teachers share their religious quest with pupils. It would, however, not be accepted if teachers would say things like: 'You don't believe these stories from the Bible, do you?'. According to the school board, it would not be possible for Muslim teachers to work at this school. Some teachers regret this, because it is important in their view that the staff mirrors the diversity in society and the pupil population in the school.

Aims of Religious Education as a subject are to gain knowledge of Christianity and other religions and worldviews, personal identity development, and meeting with each other. The RE teacher wants to accompany pupils in their search for religious identity in the current post secular context.

### 3.1.5. Erasmus College

This ecumenical school is located in one of the large Dutch cities and has about 600 pupils. The educational level is lower vocational education. In a short period of time, the number of pupils has decreased dramatically. Approximately one-third of the pupils have a Dutch background. Another third have a Surinam background (of whom 80% are Catholic). The other pupils have a Moroccan or Turkish background. Many of these pupils are Muslim. The school population represents the population of the city where the school is situated.

Space for religion and identity is important at this school because these topics are important to the pupils. The school tries to distinguish itself from other schools with this point. Most of the teachers are not involved with a church. However, religion plays, in one way or another, a role in the lives of most of the teachers.

Religious education at this school is about showing pupils what is of value, where their own values come from, and what 'living together' means. In the religious celebrations (Christmas, Easter), the original meaning is connected to actual topics.

Recently, a prayer room for Muslim pupils has been opened. The school principal explains that he could not refuse this request of Muslim pupils, simply because of the fact that he is of the opinion that belief is a crucial aspect of humanity and therefore cannot be denied.

### 3.1.6. Farel College

This school is situated in a middle-sized city in the middle of the country. There are about 1300 pupils who receive education at a lower vocational educational level. Most pupils have a lower socioeconomical family background, and these families have to face multiple problems. Ten percent of the pupils have a Moroccan–Islamic background. About 50% of the other pupils have some knowledge about Christianity. All pupils are, however, expected to participate in morning prayers, celebrations, and RE classes. Personal development is very important at this school. The school is rooted in the Christian tradition. This is made visible via the social, emotional, and religious education pupils are given. It is not a prerequisite that teachers themselves believe. However, they should be able and willing to 'reflect on life'. There is no teacher with a headscarf as of yet. The school principal is of the opinion that this should be possible, although he expects that this will lead to discussions with the group of teachers.

In the first two years of RE classes, the focus is on Christianity. In the years that follow, other religions and worldviews are also addressed. It is important that pupils have knowledge about religions. This knowledge could lead to respect for others.

According to the RE teacher, the RE lessons are the only legitimation for the Christian identity of the school. Also, the mere fact that this subject is taught at school stimulates, in the eyes of the RE teacher, the confidence parents have in the school, as they associate RE lessons with attention paid to

norms and values. The teacher's own view is that it is very important that pupils learn to ask for help (be it from God or other humans) and to take care for others as well.

### 3.1.7. Groen van Prinsterer College

Groen van Prinsterer College is situated in a middle-sized city in the middle of the Netherlands. There are about 1700 pupils at the school. Education is offered at the levels of lower vocational education to gymnasium. About 5% of the pupils have a migrant background. This percentage mirrors the overall population in this region quite well. About 10% of the pupils attend church services on a more or less regular basis. Teachers have to relate to Christianity in one way or another. It is not necessary to be a church member or to actively practice one's faith. Muslims are not appointed as teachers, although the opinions on this issue are mixed within the staff of the school. The school principal himself would not see it as a problem, especially because Muslim teachers could probably connect more easily to the Muslim pupils.

Religious Education lessons are part of thematic projects. Several school subjects are integrated around several topics, and each subject provides a particular view on the theme. For instance, with the theme 'power', the RE lessons are about Bible stories related to power. The Bible stories are offered as a starting point for reflection. The RE teacher thinks it is very important to let pupils experience how wonderful it is if you can fall back on these stories during your life. It is important also to be open-minded and to have an open attitude to other people. Broadening the mind of pupils, in many ways, is an important aim at this school. Therefore, many extracurricular activities such as journeys (abroad) are also offered.

### 3.1.8. Heiland College

Heiland College is situated in one of the cities in the Dutch urban agglomeration. The school offers education from the level of lower vocational education to gymnasium. There are over 1000 pupils. Almost all students are native Dutch. All pupils have a Christian background. In the past, all pupils came from one specific Dutch Protestant church. Nowadays, admission rules are broader. Parents have to be actively involved church members. Before a pupil starts at this school, there is an interview regarding admission between the parents and the school board to find out whether the parents' ideas on Christian upbringing fit adequately with the identity of the school.

The Bible is the foundation of the school. Education at school is seen as an extension of a Bible-validated upbringing at home. To become appointed at this school, it is very important to be an active church member. Teachers have to be religious role models for the pupils. Although all teachers are Christians, the diversity between them has grown enormously over the last few years. There are, for instance, different opinions on baptism, creational theology, and homosexuality.

The RE teacher wants pupils to explore their own opinions regarding religion. She notices that some pupils are afraid of God and hell. As a teacher, she wants to teach them that God is endless love. However, she realizes that religious beliefs cannot be forced. In addition to that, she wants to teach her pupils social awareness and respect for other cultures and people who have different opinions, as she is sometimes shocked by the way her pupils think about Muslims and homosexuals.

All teachers make clear connections between their subject and their Christian beliefs. Pupils are also challenged to do so, for instance, when writing papers.

## 3.2. Teachers' Relations to the Formal Christian Identity of their Schools

In our study, we indicated the school leaders and teachers with a fictitious name. This name starts with the same letter as the fictive name of the school. Respondents with a fictitious name starting with an 'A' work at Altena College, respondents with a fictive name starting with a 'B' at Bonhoeffer College, et cetera. This enables readers to make connections between a quote of a respondent and the context of the particular school (s)he works at. (In this study, two board members of Heiland College were

involved. Henk is mainly occupied with identity and quality issues, but is not involved in guiding education. Hans, as the school leader, is.)

Table 1 shows that not all school leaders describe themselves as Christians. Those who do so count themselves as belonging to different streams within Protestantism.

**Table 1.** Religion/worldview of school leaders (self-indication).

Protestant Christian, not further specified	Anco, Dirk
Protestant Christian: orthodox	Cor, Henk
Protestant Christian: liberal	Bea, Gerard, Hans
Agnostic	Ed
Atheist	Frits

All interviewed teachers indicate that they had a Christian upbringing. Table 2 shows that most of the teachers still relate themselves, although in different ways, to Christianity. We see that at Heiland College and Calvijn College, most teachers describe themselves as orthodox (strict) Christians. At the other schools, we find more liberal Christians, but we find there some orthodox Christians as well.

**Table 2.** Religion/worldview of teachers (self-indication).

Protestant Christian, not further specified	Dagmar, Daphne, Helen, Giel, Gea
Protestant Christian: orthodox	Bram, Babette, Chris, Colin, Carlijn, Daan, Femke, Harry, Harm, Herman
Protestant Christian: evangelical	Albert, Coos, Claas, Evert
Protestant Christian: liberal	Arjan, Annet, Anton, Boris, Dolf, Ellen, Frank, Fleur, Gusta
Agnostic	Barbara
Roman Catholic	Eva
Atheist	Erik, Friso
Other: 'multiple believer'	Geertje

Although we should treat these outcomes with caution, as our sample is not representative, comparison of the two tables brings several insights. From the comparison between Tables 1 and 2, we learn that it is not self-evident that the (self-indicated) religious identity of teachers matches the religious identity of the school leader. At Calvijn College and Heiland College, the convergence, also amongst teachers, is the highest. It seems that at Bonhoeffer College, the religious backgrounds of the school leader and teachers are the most diverse (from agnostic to orthodox). Also, at Erasmus College and Farel College, there is reasonable variety. At Farel College, for instance, the school leader sees himself as atheist, one of the teachers as orthodox, and another as liberal.

Table 3 shows that many of the teachers who participated in our study are active church members. With the exceptions of Calvijn College and Heiland College, teachers who are not involved in church also participated in the research.

**Table 3.** Church involvement of teachers.

Active	Albert, Anton, Bram, Babette, Chris, Coos, Colin, Carlijn, Claas, Eva, Evert, Frank, Femke, Giel, Helen, Harry, Harm, Herman
To some extent	Annet, Boris, Daan, Dagmar, Dolf, Ellen, Fleur, Gea, Gusta
Not	Arjan, Barbara, Daphne, Erik, Friso, Geertje

### 3.3. Challenges Experienced

Section 3.2 shows that there can be a discrepancy between the worldview of a teacher and the formal (religious) identity of the school and/or school leader and/or colleagues. The relation between one's personal worldview and the formal identity of the school is characterized by some teachers in terms of 'challenges'. From the interviews, we learn that these challenges are present at all schools. Some of these challenges, however, play a greater role at particular schools. Also, the way a certain

challenge manifests itself differs from school to school. Often, connections can be made with the religious background of school leaders and teachers and/or the used admission policy. What a specific teacher experiences as a dilemma depends on, amongst other things, how his/her worldview relates to those of his/her colleagues and school leader. A teacher who describes himself as orthodox and works at a meaning-oriented school experiences different challenges than his liberal colleague. Such a teacher experiences also different challenges than another teacher who also describes herself as orthodox, but who is working at a tradition school (see the type descriptions in Section 2.1).

In this section, we will further elaborate on the challenges teachers experience as a result of varying worldviews. It is not our aim to give a complete overview of (possible) challenges teachers can experience in relation to religious diversity at school; however, by describing how several teachers deal with particular challenges, we aim to offer insights into processes at work when there are diverse worldviews amongst the school board, school leaders, teachers, parents, and pupils. As the focus of this research is on the views and opinions of teachers working in Christian secondary education in all its variety, we do not systematically relate their views to the particular schools they are working at. On the basis of the (fictive) names of the teachers it is, however, possible to make this connection. In this contribution, we focus on morning prayers, religious celebrations, and challenges related to (religious) uniqueness and openness. We chose to focus on these issues as from the interviews it became clear that, in one way or the other, these issues are relevant at all participating schools. (The quotations are translated into English by the first (corresponding) author. The original (Dutch) transcripts can be seen upon request.)

### 3.3.1. Morning Prayers and Religious Celebrations

It is striking that many teachers mention that in relation to morning prayers (in Dutch, ‘dagopeningen’, a kind of meditative thought for the day that could be explicitly religious or address a more general theme) and religious celebrations, there can be frictions between what teachers find important themselves to bring in during these moments and what others expect from them. Not all participating teachers personally experience challenges in relation to morning prayers and celebrations (as their own views and practices are more or less in line with the expectations within their particular school context), but they do observe these challenges among their colleagues.

Also, many school leaders mention ‘morning prayers and religious celebrations’ during the interview. Often, they connect this with what has (not) been discussed on this topic during the recruitment procedure:

School leader Dirk of Da Costa College explains that during the recruitment procedure, teachers are told that morning prayers are to be held. So, in principle, teachers know what is expected. Although pupils tell him that some teachers skip the morning prayers, he has no clear strategy to make sure that teachers do indeed keep the morning prayers:

Dirk: ( . . . ) I am not going to teachers to say ‘I heard from the pupils [that] you are not keeping the morning prayers.’ So I try to do that via a detour. But that is complicated.

This school leader actually feels powerless here, and teachers recognize this. Dolf, the RE teacher, states:

Dolf: Okay, now we have ‘selection at the gate’. You are asked to agree with the Christian identity, cooperate in celebrations and morning prayers and so on. Most people nicely agree. When you say ‘no’, you are not hired. But once you are in . . . If you have acted the play well, then you are in. Then you do not need to support the Christian identity of the school any longer. There is no control. Once we were asked if we do morning prayers, but there are teachers who never do that. You are not fired for not keeping morning prayers. ( . . . ) There is also no alternative. In that sense, the school is embarrassed. What to do with that . . . .?

This teacher really puts his finger on the salient spot. In the context of selection and recruitment, when there is a job at stake, teachers not always remain close to themselves and their own opinions.

They make promises which they cannot or do not want to realize later on. Not keeping morning prayers is the strongest expression of this, with the result that school leaders have the feeling that they lose control over their teachers. School leader Bea (liberal Protestant Christian) states:

Bea: (...) You work at a Christian school . . . so you are reading the Bible, but if you don't do that . . . I don't always figure that out. But recently I got some information... That some colleagues don't keep the morning prayers: I visited a lesson of a new, young, teacher. To my surprise, he didn't start with reading from the Bible, but he read a story. That could be fine and I thought 'Well, how will he connect this to the Bible?'. But he didn't. And then I said: 'Listen, why do you not read from the Bible?'. He answered that he had understood that that was not always necessary. I said: "You did not understand that right. You should have read from the Bible ( . . . ). You should keep to the appointments. If you say at the job interview that it is no problem for you, you should do so. And if you do not want to read from the Bible, you should come and tell. But not, 'not reading from the Bible without informing us.' ( . . . ) And recently ( . . . ) a few pupils in the exam class asked: "Is there still a Bible reading schedule?" I said 'Yes'. And then I informed the colleagues via email that the Bible reading schedule is indeed there and I asked them to use it. Well, no one responded . . .

Apart from job interviews, teachers sometimes experience only a few opportunities to influence the way the formal religious identity of the school is expressed. Teachers have the idea that, amongst other things, morning prayers and religious celebrations are prescribed in a top-down manner and that there is no room to reflect together on how these activities can be given shape in a way that fits the teachers who actually (should) do the work. Following the quotation from Evert (evangelical), an RE teacher at Erasmus College, also makes this clear:

Evert: The choice to keep morning prayers is prescribed by [the] board and management. That was five years ago. We should use *Zoutkorrel* [25]. My impression is that most colleagues found it just as unsalted as . . . Anyhow, they did not use it and were also not intending to use it in the future. At a certain moment, it was decided to use another method, which should be used from then on. But that didn't work out either. So, finally, they concluded that five out of fifty people use it. Well, apparently we just shouldn't do it. Well, to me that did not seem to be the right conclusion, but thereafter, the school board and management have just let it go. I think one should never sanction these kind of things, especially not as it is related to one's own identity. I believe that every colleague would have been willing to do morning prayers, but not based on such a Christian method.

This quotation makes it clear that in the end, the school board gave up expecting teachers to keep morning prayers. The teacher Evert deeply deplores that. He holds the opinion that if room had been given to teachers to give shape to the morning prayers in their own way, there would have been enough schoolwide support to continue morning prayers.

With a method which has been imposed top-down and which was considered by many people involved as 'far too Christian', it has come to nothing at this school.

Also at Groen van Prinsterer College, from time to time, there is discussion on celebrating Christian holidays. Diversity at school is so substantial that it is not clear to everyone why Christian celebrations are organized at school. Teacher Giel (Protestant, active church member) says:

Giel: Yes, [the] biggest challenge is the huge diversity. Probably that is not only so in our schools. ( . . . ) At a reformed school you have colleagues who all faithfully go to church once or twice a week, and who all think likeminded. It is a kind of 'uniform thinking'. We don't have that here. And sometimes that wrenches of course. Because one is a believer, another a little less. And some don't believe at all. Sometimes colleagues say: "What is the importance of those Christian celebrations? They could abolish a few of them . . . ". Then I ask myself, why one should do that as a Christian school?

For teacher Friso (atheist), Christian celebrations are one of the few instances when it is noticeable to him that he works at a Christian school. He is very critical on the way celebrations are organized at his school:

Friso: ( . . . ) Last Christmas we went to a church. That was not a success . . . ( . . . ).

I: What happened there?

Friso: Well, those pupils never go to church . . . so it is already weird that we really want them to be there. And yes, they also can't sit still. And [my] colleagues just expected the pupils to be quiet for a whole hour. That really strikes me, but . . . yes, so those colleagues felt the effects of this disgrace. ( . . . ) In my mentor group of fifteen pupils no one ever visits a church. So one can ask: Are you really a Christian school?

Later on in the interview, this teacher makes it clear that he would prefer to organize an activity with his pupils which really appeals to them, rather than sitting in a church with the whole school just because that is simply something one would expect a Christian school to do. He admits, however, that he does recognize a field of tension here. As some of the teachers do find these celebrations in church important:

Friso: Well, there are colleagues who think it is important and also nice to go to a church. They say "it is a Christian school". Well, I think that you can remain calling this till some never-never day, but you can wonder to what extent that is still important in practice?

School leader Frits also reflects on the Christmas celebrations. In teams, teachers were free to give shape to this celebration. It struck him that a celebration was organized in church, even though the school board did not promote that:

Frits (atheist): (...) It is always a search how to give shape to celebrations; that counts for every school. Most children are of course not used to [being] silent for a while or to listen to choir music or whatever. These old church services, these old expressions, they actually don't know them very well any longer, so yes, how do you organize a celebration in a church? We purposefully organize the celebrations on a smaller scale, by working with departments and teams. Every teacher team celebrates Christmas with their own pupils. Interestingly, last Christmas, the celebration was organized again on a larger scale and the church was included again. We did not work towards that as school board, they organized it themselves. ( . . . ) It was a diverse program and everything [ran] very well.

It is remarkable that the school leader holds very positive memories on this Christmas celebration in church, while teacher Friso expressed himself negatively about this particular celebration. These diverse perceptions on the same event exactly show the tensions which can exist at schools when it comes to religious celebrations.

Also, from the following quotation, it becomes clear that not all teachers can identify very well with the way celebrations are given shape at school. Teacher Eric (atheist) has the feeling that he has to adjust to a great extent during the celebrations:

Erik: ( . . . ) Well, the celebrations and . . . the prayers and the holding of hands during the celebration and so on . . . . That's when I really notice it. ( . . . ).

Erik: (...) I really have to adjust myself to a great extent. If it is only for a short period of time, I don't really bother, but if I should do it more often, I wouldn't like it I suppose. But it is not so that I am not used to it. I also know a colleague who also really isn't into these kinds of things. And for that colleague it really is a bad experience. It completely doesn't fit into her life view and also not into mine. Only the interesting thing is that I got a Christian upbringing so I am well aware of it.

### 3.3.2. Uniqueness and Openness

In several schools, we learnt from both teachers and school leaders that they are searching to find a balance between holding to the (Christian) identity at the one hand and being open to others at the other hand. Questions related to uniqueness and openness are expressed in the schools in different ways and to different extents. Teacher Gea (Protestant, not further specified) sometimes wonders whether the uniqueness of her school is still present enough and what this uniqueness consists of:

Gea: Concerning our Christian identity, I sometimes question what we really stand for. In the Netherlands, we are very tolerant and 'anything goes', and that is fine, because otherwise I could not have been really myself as well, so it is all very mixed . . .

Interviewer: Yes, so you see for yourself the benefits of tolerance, but you also see what one can lose because of tolerance?

Gea: Yes, if you allow everything and anything is possible . . . In the end, you just don't keep your own identity, your own . . . what you really stand for.

Interviewer: Does this apply to this school as well?

Gea: Well, of course we simply have morning prayers and things like that, although I doubt how all colleagues are giving shape to that. I myself hardly teach [during] the first hour of the day so I hardly do morning prayers. We have week assemblies, celebrations, so these are the regular elements . . . ( . . . ). But, what I mean to say is that sometimes it goes very far. For instance, we take enough pupils and teachers with Moroccan and other backgrounds. That is fine and in a sense I think that school should reflect society. But on the other hand, to what extent do you participate, with ever again all those other celebrations, all those other things? At a certain point I think that one chooses a Christian school, and then ( . . . ) at a certain point demands can be made. That is simply part of the game.

On one hand, Gea finds it important that the school is a reflection of society and that pupils and teachers of different cultural and religious backgrounds are welcome. On the other hand, she is of the opinion that there should also be enough room to set limits on what is possible at a Christian school and what is not.

At Calvijn College, the tension between uniqueness and openness also plays a role, but in a different manner. At this school, some teachers would like to have more opportunities to introduce their pupils to diversity. Claas (evangelical) explains:

Claas: I rather hate it that my audience is 90% church-going. ( . . . ).

Claas: They are biased, have already taken their positions (...).

Interviewer: So you would like to have more diversity within the group?

Claas: Yes, I really do.

Interviewer: More different perspectives.

Claas: Cultures . . . Yes. This morning we had a discussion on Geert Wilders (*A famous Dutch politician, leader of the PVV (Party for Freedom), who holds rather outspoken views on, amongst other issues, Islam in general and the Quran in particular. GB-T et al.*). Then I say: "That is all very well, but there is just no single Moroccan in our class.". I say: "You would speak completely different if Mohammed would be in our class . . . " ( . . . ). So therefore I really want to cause friction (...). If we would move this school for a moment, together to Rotterdam, then you have such a different discussion . . . And I hope that they would understand that a little bit (...).

Interviewer: And are you trying to stimulate those contacts . . .

Claas: Yes, yes, I try to simply invite Muslims in our classes, for discussion, or to organize a forum ( . . . ). I try to challenge them to contact such people, for instance at the sports club. Like 'just talk to them'. Ask him what he stands for. Why he is fasting. Just ask.

Different from the earlier cited teachers, who appear to be more or less concerned whether their schools will keep enough uniqueness, this teacher expresses that in his view there could be more openness at school. So, also in relation to this topic, we see the great variety between (and within) Christian schools.

### 3.4. Recommendations of the Teachers

We have discussed (some of the) tensions which are experienced by teachers in relation to the perceived variety in religious views within the school. As there is diversity within and between the schools, the recommendations we discuss here are also diverse.

Not all teachers have clear ideas about recommendations. Teachers who do have ideas are rather critical towards their school leaders. Almost all ideas have to do with making more room for diversity and the worldviews of individual teachers.

#### 3.4.1. Let the Formal Religious Identity Correspond with the Lived Identity

Dolf, who expressed his views on the job interview, which he compares to a play, at least as far as it concerns religious elements (see Section 3.3.1), is very critical on the recruitment procedures. His proposal is to create an identity everyone can agree with:

Dolf: ( . . . ) So I would rather say: Skip that question (*on whether you are willing to represent the Christian identity of the school, GB-T et al.*) at the beginning. And create an identity everyone can agree with. And investigate to make sure that everyone can agree indeed.

In fact, Dolf requests the school leaders, who also hold the job interviews with new personnel, to take the lead in creating an identity which will be broadly supported by the teachers.

#### 3.4.2. Express Respect for Privacy

Another teacher, again from Da Costa College, comes with a completely different recommendation. Daphne experiences the unfamiliarity at her school with the worldviews of colleagues as being positive. She appreciates this privacy, because it is not expected that staff members share their personal convictions. She would consider it an infringement of privacy if staff members were to openly discuss each other's worldviews in order to come to a (school) identity with which everyone can agree:

I: (...) Do you have insight into, for instance, how many colleagues are, for example, atheist, or . . . ?

Daphne: No, not at all, we don't know that from each other and that is just fine, isn't it?

I: You like that?

Daphne: Yes, I really like that. Not knowing too much of each other. I like that.

The recommendation to come to a common lived and experienced identity can be contrary to the expressed wish to respect the privacy of colleagues. This need could, however, also be part of this common identity. Nevertheless, this would soon become difficult, as for some people involved, identity consists of bringing in one's own world view, whereas to others, 'adjudging privacy to each other' is an important element of identity.

### 3.4.3. Recommendations Considering Recruitment Policy

In almost every interview, the recruitment policy of the school is addressed. While Calvijn College and Heiland College have a stricter admission policy, at the other schools, for every vacancy, it could again be a dilemma to what extent the qualities of a candidate should count in relation to his or her worldview (Christian or not).

Fleur, who expressed that in her opinion, the Christian identity of the school could be reflected more clearly, tends to think that Christian schools should only hire Christian school leaders and Christian teachers. On the other hand, she sees disadvantages, especially when it comes to hiring good teachers. Because we recognize Fleur's considerations in many of the interviews with teachers, we quote her at length:

I: Would it be a prerequisite for you that a Christian school has a Christian school board or . . . ?

Fleur: ( . . . ) I think it is hardly . . . Well you can hire only people with a Christian background, especially as board members. ( . . . ) You could also hire only Christian teachers, but at this school that would mean . . . At a certain point you will have a situation like: "Okay, we have mister Janssen and mister Pietersen. Mister Janssen is a better teacher, but unfortunately he doesn't have a Christian background.". Who do you choose?

I: Well?

Fleur: ( . . . ) I would also choose mister Janssen . . . Because you can also learn Dutch without belief, so to say ( . . . ). But I do expect that he will subscribe [to] the rules of the school and that he would also commit himself to organize Christmas celebrations and so on. Although it would be an inconvenience if I, as non-Christian, was to organize a Christmas celebration, anyhow.

The question which this teacher raises while talking is whether one could expect non-Christian teachers to organize Christian celebrations or to teach religious education. Fleur would not particularly refuse non-Christians at school, but she would not give them certain key positions:

Fleur: Certain key positions, like [in] the subject Religious Education . . . That is central to me. As are board members and school leaders . . . Look, I don't expect them to go to church, but there should be a certain commitment.

In situations in which colleagues do not feel capable or do not want to participate because of their own worldview, she is willing to take over their task, although she actually thinks that these people are not in the right place at the school:

Fleur: Fleur: Imagine she (*a colleague who is Jehovah's witness and who finds it difficult to organize Christian celebrations, GBT et al.*) would be a mentor. I would tell her, although she knows that I find it strange: "Bring your class to me, I will do it . . . ". To show her that I am there for her, despite my mixed feelings with this situation. ( . . . ) This is how it should be in my eyes.

In fact, Fleur gives several recommendations here: First of all, that for key positions, only people who completely support the Christian identity of the school should be hired. Secondly, that one cannot expect non-Christian colleagues to cooperate in, for instance, Christian celebrations. Thirdly, that such tasks should be given to teachers who can be wholeheartedly committed because of their own worldview.

#### 3.4.4. Create More Openness to Christianity

Amongst several teachers in different schools, there is embarrassment to share their own worldview with colleagues and/or pupils. Dolf has the impression that there are unspoken expectations which make people embarrassed to speak freely about their motivations. It is his contention that a change in culture is needed:

Dolf: ( . . . ) Actually it should be like: “Yeah, you have got something with mindfulness and I have something with Jesus Christ.”. That teachers would just share that and discuss amongst each other what they think about it. Now you don’t get to know each other because it remains unspoken.

From the interview with Dolf, it becomes clear what he further means by a change in culture: it implies more room to openly talk about the Christian belief, without condemnation. Dolf now strongly believes that there is a ‘boarding house smell’ around Christianity. People see it as outdated and don’t want to have anything to do with it, whereas things like “yoga and mindfulness are very much appreciated by everyone”. The needed cultural change will take and will need some time, according to Dolf:

Dolf: The Dutch do want to be religious, and spiritual, but no longer Christian. So they are open to everything except for . . . First of all we need a generation which is fully separated from that. A generation which will explore and will see Christianity again as an option. ( . . . ) And then there will be new chances.

#### 4. Discussion

In the introduction, three questions were presented as central in the present article: ‘How do teachers (try to) relate to the formal Protestant Christian identity of their school?’, ‘What challenges do they experience in doing so?’, and ‘What recommendations do teachers have for better dealing with these challenges?’ On the basis of the described empirical study, these questions can be answered as follows:

For many teachers, their personal worldview is fully coherent with the formal religious identity of the school. This leads to tensions in several domains. At several schools, teachers have different ideas on how to give shape to morning prayers and Christian holidays. Some teachers are of the opinion that the Bible should play an important role in the religious formation of the pupils. Others think that the Bible should just be used as an important cultural source. Furthermore, teachers experience a tension between the extent to which schools can and should be open to diversity and the extent to which the own (Christian) identity should remain visible. Some are of the opinion that openness is a threat to a clear Christian school identity, while others think the two can be combined.

Teachers give several recommendations on how to deal with these tensions. Not all recommendations go in the same direction. On one hand, there are teachers who are of the opinion that it would be fruitful to have more exchange on the (formal) religious identity of the school and what this means to teachers and school leaders. On the other hand, there are teachers who do not think it is a good idea to share worldviews and opinions. They cherish their privacy and emphasize that colleagues have that right as well, also in relation to school leaders and pupils.

Next to that, it seems that teachers appreciate the possibility to discuss the tensions they experience in all openness and honesty with the school leader(s). However, this openness is, by far, not always experienced.

Often, it seems that in the job interview, there is already a kind of taboo to be open on what one really thinks about, for instance, the morning prayers and the extent to which the Christian worldview really plays a role in someone’s daily life practice. Another recommendation by teachers is that school leaders should face the reality that there is diversity among teachers in respect to religion and worldview, both at a personal as well as an institutional level. Schools should,

for instance, not desperately cling to (a particular shape of) morning prayers or particular views on 'Christian education' and views on what should happen (or not) at Christian schools. Some teachers recommend their principal to reconsider the formal Christian identity of the school and to search for another, more inclusive and embracing school identity with which everyone involved can identify themselves adequately.

Using Charles Taylor's [4] definition of secularization we referred to in the Introduction section, it is clear that teachers are looking and longing for meaning in life. This is characteristic of our secular age, Taylor says. It is also clear from our results that the school context and the school's formal identity is quite often not in accord with the personal religion or worldview of the teachers. School leaders should take their 'pilgrimage' seriously, because it is important to encourage the teachers in pursuing their search to the end and to facilitate their journey, while also taking into account the plurality of spiritual choices people make [26].

On the basis of our findings, it is our contention that a crucial issue for Christian secondary schools in the year 2018 is the formulation of their aims regarding education, broadly speaking, but also related to religion and worldview, as clarity on educational aims can contribute to educational and pedagogical quality of schools. Is the aim the transmission of the presented and represented subject matter, or the transformation of the subject matter by the pupils in the processes of their meaning-making and meaning-taking and the development of their personal identity or personhood? The tension between these two approaches can adequately be conceptualized in terms of 'teaching for commitment' (the teachers stimulate the pupils to become Christians), 'teaching about commitment' (the teachers inform and confront the pupils with different religions and worldviews), and 'teaching from commitment' (the teachers try to foster the development of the pupils' self-responsible self-determination regarding religion and/or worldview). We notice that these tensions are now truly part and parcel of Christian secondary school in the Netherlands. It is the responsibility of all the stakeholders to deal with these tensions and develop in theory and practice a *modus procedendi*, a way to collectively reflect on and to act from.

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