LOOKING AT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGIONS
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

PAUL VERMEER
JOHANNES A. VAN DER VEN
University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Abstract
This paper explores the interreligious orientations of Dutch secondary school students. On the basis of a typology of four interreligious orientations, i.e. exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism and dialogical-pluralism, a measuring instrument was designed that was used to inquire into the extent to which the students agreed or disagreed with these orientations. The relationship between these interreligious orientations and other student characteristics was also studied. The results showed, first, that the students do not differentiate between exclusivism and inclusivism. Rather they consider this to be one and the same orientation, with which they disagree. Second, the students are ambivalent about the dialogical-pluralist orientation, but clearly favour the pluralist orientation. This reinforces the idea that young people today tend to perceive religion as an interesting sociological phenomenon, but one that does not yet affect their personal lives. This idea is also confirmed by the finding, revealed by regression analysis, that the interreligious orientations of the students are influenced hardly at all by familiar religious characteristics like church attendance or religious belief. The students’ preference for one of these interreligious orientations seems to be best explained by the positive or negative influence of the other interreligious orientations. In view of these findings, it is suggested that this way of looking at the relationship between religions may be a typical youth phenomenon, one which, in terms of Erikson’s psychosocial theory of identity formation, can be called an identity moratorium.

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands as in other European countries, the number of people who come from a religious background other than Christianity is growing. As a result, religious plurality and diversity are becoming important features of Dutch society. In 2001 about 9% of the Dutch population were first or second generation immigrants from non-Western countries, the majority of whom (70%) belonged to one of four ethnic groups: Surinamese, Turkish, Moroccan and Antillean/Aruban. This is reflected in a growing number of Hindu and Muslim believers, with Islam now the second largest religion in the Netherlands next to Christianity. Today more than 40% of non-Western immigrants in the Netherlands are below the age of 20, which means that this demographic group will determine the Dutch birth rate in the near future (cf. CBS 2001, 11-22). More detailed statistics about the
LOOKING AT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGIONS

age structure of the Dutch population confirm this phenomenon. In 1999 about 18.2% of the Dutch population as a whole were in the 0 to 14 year age group, while 5.9% were between 15 and 19 years old. The age structure of the aforementioned ethnic minority groups, however, was quite different. Of the Moroccan population, 34.7% were between 0 and 14 years old, and 10.3% were between 15 and 19. The same trends were seen in the Turkish (31.5% between 0 and 14, 9% between 15 and 19), Antillean/Aruban (23.4% and 8.2% respectively) and Surinamese (23% and 9% respectively) ethnic groups. Thus the allochthonous population in the Netherlands is relatively young compared with the autochthonous population (cf. Tesser, Merens & Van Praag 1999, 30-33). Furthermore, the proportion of the allochthonous population in the 15 to 19 age group is expected to increase in the near future, which of course also affects the student population at the secondary school level. As the proportion of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Antillean/Aruban students in secondary education increases, the number of secondary school students with a Muslim or Hindu background will also increase. Thus these figures not only indicate that Dutch society is really developing into a plural society, but also that the classroom may become an important place for intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

But Dutch society is not just becoming a multicultural and multireligious society. There are also signs of growing tensions among certain groups in Dutch society. These tensions, to be sure, are not always and not exclusively between the autochthonous majority and certain ethnic minority groups. Tensions also exist within both the autochthonous and allochthonous populations. For example, there are many autochthones who consider religion a thing of the past and are opposed to the presence of the churches in the public sphere, while others hold an entirely different opinion. The allochthonous minorities are also marked by such internal conflicts. While the elder generations most often consider their religion to be sacrosanct, religious participation often declines rapidly in the younger generations (cf. Van der Ven 2002, 248). Hence, we do not claim simply that Dutch society is affected by serious tensions between the autochthonous and the allochthonous population. The situation is more complex than this. However, when tensions between autochthones and allochthones do come to the fore, religion often plays an important role. This is revealed, for example, by a case study involving Rotterdam youngsters and their images of Islam (cf. Phalet, Van Lotringen & Entzinger 2000). As this study shows, Islam remains a very important element of the formation of personal identity for second-generation Turks and Moroccans, i.e. Turks
and Moroccans born in the Netherlands, even as involvement in the coun-
try of origin clearly declines. Moreover, 24% of the Turkish and 34% of the
Moroccan youngsters who participated in the study considered Europe a
political threat to Islam, while 28% of the autochthonous youngsters
considered Islam a political threat to the European countries. As far as
general acceptance and respect for Islam is concerned, 44% of the autochtho-
rous participants in the study rejected Islam. Of course, these figures stem
from a case study among young people in Rotterdam and cannot be gen-
eralised to the entire Dutch population. They serve only as an illustrative
element of how the growing numbers of inhabitants from non-Christian
backgrounds leads to socio-religious tensions in certain parts of the Nether-
lands. In addition, as this example also shows, such socio-religious ten-
sions are often perceived as a tension between Islam and Western European
culture, a trend that, in the Netherlands as elsewhere, was doubtless accel-
erated by the bombing of the World Trade Centre in 2001.

In view of the demographic, cultural, social and political factors con-
tributing to the increasingly plural nature of Dutch society, the question
arises as to whether there still exist binding values shared by most mem-
bers of Dutch society, if the traditional carriers of these values, i.e. the
different religious and cultural traditions, are in conflict rather than in dia-
logue (cf. Van Gennip 2002). That is why we believe that it is both instruc-
tive and useful to study young people’s attitudes and ideas about the
relationship between religions. Do youngsters consider religions as equal
or do they believe in a qualitative difference between religions? Do they
recognize the need for a dialogue between different religions? These are
only a few examples of the questions we address in this article. First, a
theoretical overview is presented of the different ways in which the relation-
ship between religions may be perceived (section 2). Then we describe
the measuring instrument based on these theoretical notions that was used
to study the interreligious orientations of secondary school students (sec-
tion 3). Next, we present our research findings, first reporting on the stu-
dents’ interreligious orientations as such, then considering the social location
of the students’ orientations and, as a third step, looking for important
predictors for these orientations (section 4). The article ends with a crit-
ical discussion of our research findings (section 5).

2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGIONS

For a correct understanding of what follows, it is very important to note
that we are dealing here with what we refer to as formal views about the
relationship between religions. That is to say, these views are not about the specific way Islam, for instance, is perceived in Christianity or Hinduism, but rather the general and formal way in which the relationship between different religious traditions is conceived of. Formal views are models with the help of which adherents of a particular religious tradition may deal with religious plurality (cf. Vroom 2001). Within theological literature, especially in the field known as ‘theology of religions’, three such views or models are commonly distinguished: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. This typology, which was initially proposed by Race during the early eighties (cf. Race 2001), is both popular and useful, but its weakness lies in the rather vague understanding of pluralism. Whereas today there seems to be consensus concerning the models of exclusivism and inclusivism, the pluralist model, in contrast, is described in many different ways (cf. Knitter 1995, 23-24). These different understandings range from a relativistic approach stressing the equality of all religions, to a dialogical approach stressing the need for dialogue in order to find religious truth (cf. Dreyer, Pieterse & Van der Ven 1999, 204-205). We therefore decided to differentiate Race’s three-way typology more closely by breaking down the pluralism model into two components. As a result our research focuses on four ways of dealing with religious plurality: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism and dialogical pluralism. In the following, we will describe each of these theoretical models in more detail.

2.1. Exclusivism

The term ‘exclusivism’ denotes the view that only one religion, i.e. one’s own, contains the absolute truth, and that, consequently, all other religions are false. Referring to the Christian version of exclusivism, Race (2001, 23-25) identifies two primary principles. The first is the principle of revelation, according to which the truth of the Christian faith is not a matter of human judgment, but a ‘God-given’ insight. Second is the principle of the authority of Jesus Christ, as expressed in the content of the Gospel. Hence, the claim that salvation is only possible through Jesus Christ is a basic truth, according to the exclusivists, because this is revealed to man by God and underscored by the message of the Gospel.

The exclusivist view is rooted in mono-faith societies or homogeneous cultures in which plurality of religions or world-views did not yet exist (cf. Sterkens 2001, 49-50). This does not mean, however, that exclusivism necessarily stands in opposition to a pluralist society. In its most extreme version, the exclusivist claim would be that only one’s own religion is absolutely and uniquely true and that other religions, therefore, should be
prohibited. But it is also possible to imagine a more open version of exclusivism, for instance one in which followers of one religious tradition admit that their tradition is not the sole possessor of truth in all respects and that they may perhaps learn something from other religions traditions. Still, such a more open version remains essentially an exclusivist view as long as people are not prepared to question their own basic beliefs in light of encounters with followers of other religious traditions (cf. Hobson & Edwards 1999, 48-49). Thus it is possible for adherents of such a more open version of exclusivism to work together with people of different beliefs, for instance if they share certain common interests, and even to respect other beliefs, but – and this is the crux of the matter – they do not feel the need to enter into a dialogue about matters of religious truth or salvation (cf. Vroom 2001, 17) because they believe that they already possess the truth. It is the unwillingness to enter into a dialogue with followers of other traditions that is decisive in this respect. For example, Christians may say that they respect Islam because it is the second largest religion in the country or because the constitution accords equal rights to all religious believers. But, as Taylor (1994) would say, this does not result in an authentic recognition of the Muslim believer, because that would demand a true and sincere dialogue with the other and an exchange of basic beliefs and convictions in which mutual identities are formed. It is especially this latter aspect that the exclusivist view fails to see. As Knitter (1995, 27) points out, if exclusivists advocate a dialogue with followers of others faiths at all, their aim would be to convert the other rather than promote mutual understanding.

2.2. Inclusivism

Like the exclusivists, the inclusivists maintain the truth and superiority of their own religious tradition. The difference, however, is that in the inclusivist framework other religious traditions are considered much more positively as products of divine revelation or as legitimate paths to salvation. This is mainly done by interpreting other faiths in terms of one’s own faith and by claiming that other faiths either originate from one’s own faith or reach fulfilment in one’s own faith. The difference between exclusivism and inclusivism is only one of degree, and Knitter (1995, 28) comments that both exclusivists and inclusivists are salvational ‘monists’. Karl Rahner’s thesis of the ‘anonymous Christians’ (cf. Rahner 1962, 154-156), is probably the best known example of this line of thought from the point of view of Christianity.
With this thesis, Rahner tried to bridge the gap between the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* and the idea that God’s love is addressed to the whole of humankind, a gap that had led some to wonder whether a good God would “refuse salvation to those who lead morally good lives but through no fault of their own are unacquainted with the Christian message” (Hobson & Edwards 1999, 50). Rahner described the non-Christian religions as partial versions of the Christian faith containing partial or preliminary aspects of the Christian truth and thus posited that every true believer of a non-Christian religion was an anonymous Christian. The non-Christian religions in this way are incorporated, or included, into the Christian tradition. This view has been widely adopted in the teachings of the Catholic Church. The declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions, for example, states: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men” (Nostra Aetate, no. 2). More recently, the declaration on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, stated that the sacred writings of other religions are the “de facto instruments by which countless people throughout the centuries have been and still are able today to nourish and maintain their life-relationship to God.” But to this is immediately added that “the sacred books of other religions, which in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers, receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace which they contain” (Dominus Iesus, no. 8). These examples all stem from the Roman Catholic Christian tradition. But as Vroom (2001, 17) argues, instances of inclusivist thought can also be found in other religious traditions. As an example, Vroom refers to the Hindu belief that all religions are roads to the divine reality. Another example is the Islamic interpretation of Jesus (Christ) as an important prophetic predecessor of Mohammed also teaching the monotheistic faith (cf. Esposito 1988, 15).

2.3. *Pluralism*

For a correct understanding of this model, it should be stressed that the basic claim of pluralism is *not* that all religions are equally valid because they all worship and believe in the same God (cf. Race 2001, 29). Rather, the pluralist model is a combination of phenomenological and epistemological
arguments. From a phenomenological point of view, pluralists first of all argue that the essence of all religions lies in the human experience of the transcendent. Thus all religions are grounded in a basic human experience. Secondly, from an epistemological point of view, pluralists claim that the articulation of this basic experience in theologies and belief systems is always related to a particular cultural environment and therefore, by nature, cannot claim absolute validity. On the basis of these two arguments the conclusion is drawn that basically all religions offer an adequate picture of the Divine. And although this does not mean that there are no metaphysical and theological differences between religions, the emphasis in pluralism is on what is shared by the different religious traditions rather than on what separates them from one another (cf. Race 2001, 31-33).

One of the most significant representatives of this line of thought in the Christian tradition is John Hick, who defends this claim on the basis of the Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon (cf. Hick 1989, 240-242; cf. also Hobson & Edwards 1999, 50). Applied to religion, the noumenon, according to Hick, refers to the divine, or to ‘the Real’ in itself, while the phenomenon refers to the divine as it appears to the human consciousness. And just as Kant argued that there is always a difference between an object in itself (Ding an sich) and the way it appears to human experience, because experience is a conceptual interpretation, Hick claims that the Real as noumenon also can never be experienced directly. As a consequence, the human experience of the divine is an indirect, mediated experience. It is mediated by the traditional, human responses to the Real that humans encounter in their cultural environment, and which serve as a kind of conceptual map for religious experience. The historical religions belong to the phenomenal realm and thus are culturally conditioned and by nature relative expressions of religious belief. This also makes it impossible for any one religion to claim superiority or absolute truth. In this regard, all religions are equal and in their own way also valid responses to the experience of the Real. But although this view, contrary to the exclusivist and to some extent also the inclusivist view, seems to recognize religious plurality, it cannot escape the objection of religious relativism, because on the basis of higher order phenomenological and epistemological arguments pluralists ultimately claim that mutually exclusive religious doctrines are equally valid (cf. Vroom 2001, 18). And this again begs the question of whether this model truly recognizes religious pluralism in the theological and philosophical sense, and not merely as a sociological fact.
2.4. Dialogical pluralism

The fourth view, which we have labelled dialogical pluralism, goes beyond the strictly pluralist view of different religions as co-ordinative by stressing the need for an interreligious dialogue for the mutual enrichment of different religious traditions (cf. Vroom 2001, 18-19). In this way, the advocates of this fourth view try to overcome two kinds of shortcomings inherent in the other models.

The first shortcoming is the lack of perspective exchange, which is inherent in the exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist views. Perspective exchange refers to the ability, and willingness, to try to understand the other in terms of his or her own preconceptions. Selman (1976) calls this ‘role-taking ability’. This ability is of course not within the scope of the exclusivist view, which is primarily concerned with the believer’s own tradition. In the inclusivist model, on the other hand, attention is certainly paid to other religious traditions, but these other traditions are only considered from the perspective of one’s own tradition. Yet even the pluralist model falls short in this respect, in that pluralists simply ignore fundamental differences between religions by treating them as equal from a neutral and impartial, third-party perspective. Dialogical pluralists, therefore, try to go beyond the mere impartial recognition of religious pluralism by urging religious believers to engage in dialogue with one another and to find out in what respect traditions differ, what they share and how they can learn from each other.

The second shortcoming is of an epistemological nature. Although the exclusivists make a logical decision when they reject beliefs contrary to their own (cf. Vroom 2001, 16), the assumption that one’s own belief is the only valid one out of wide variety of versions of religious truth is epistemologically highly questionable (cf. Hobson & Edwards 1999, 49). A similar difficulty arises in the inclusivist model, which ultimately seeks to reconcile incompatible beliefs. As the example of Rahner’s thesis of the anonymous Christians showed, the claim that Christianity is the only true and uniquely salvific religion is fundamentally at odds with the claim that aspects of religious truth can also be found in other religions. Thus at the heart of the inclusivist view an epistemological tension prevails (cf. Hobson & Edwards 1999, 50). Finally, in the pluralist model, the incompatibility of different beliefs again results in epistemological discrepancies. By simply stating in advance that all religious beliefs are culturally conditioned responses to the Real, pluralists, as we have seen, are actually admitting that mutually exclusive beliefs are equally true (cf. Vroom
2001, 18). This renders the Real a meaningless concept without any explanatory power, for the Real can then mean anything at all (cf. Hobson & Edwards 1999, 54). Therefore, in order to avoid epistemological difficulties of this kind, dialogical pluralists avoid all preconceptions about the truth or falsity of different religions and instead claim that religious truth can be only be found in the dialogue between religions.

Hence, at the core of the dialogical-pluralist view is a particular understanding of interreligious dialogue. This dialogue is understood here as a communicative process “in which people of many traditions meet and enter into discussions on what is ultimately true and good and of value to life” (Vroom 1996, 5). And, as explained elsewhere (cf. Van der Ven 2003), such a communicative process basically consists of three phases or steps: information exchange, perspective exchange and perspective coordination. Information exchange refers to the mutual exchange of the cognitive, affective, volitional and practical aspects of the respective religious traditions as a result of which partners in dialogue become aware of similarities and differences between these religious traditions. But becoming aware of similarities and differences is not enough to turn communication into dialogue, because true dialogue also demands that one tries to understand the other in terms of his or her own presuppositions. This calls for perspective exchange as a key element of any dialogue. Finally, getting to know each other, gaining insight into similarities and differences and trying to understand each other is not done for its own sake, but ultimately aims at an attestative judgment regarding the truth, or partial truth, of certain elements of the respective traditions. This is done during the third phase called perspective coordination. In stressing the need for this kind of interreligious dialogue, dialogical pluralists not only acknowledge religious plurality as a sociological fact, but also as a theological and philosophical challenge. As a result, their approach to religious plurality goes beyond the relativistic recognition of the pluralists that religious truth can have many different faces, underscoring the theoretical necessity to distinguish between pluralism and dialogical pluralism.

3. Measuring Instrument

In order to study the students’ interreligious orientations, we used a measuring instrument that was designed on the basis of the above theoretical models (cf. Van der Ven 1994; Dreyer et al. 1999). This instrument, which is presented below, consists of sixteen statements expressing certain beliefs or convictions about the relationship between religions. Statements 1, 6,
11 and 15 are meant to represent the exclusivist view of the relationship between religions. Likewise, statements 2, 8, 9 and 14 represent the inclusivist view, statements 3, 7, 10 and 16 the pluralist view.

**Measuring instrument**

Below are some statements regarding the relationship between religions. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each one.

1 = strongly disagree  
2 = disagree  
3 = neither agree nor disagree  
4 = agree  
5 = strongly agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Only members of my religion have access to true redemption.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Compared to the other religions, the deepest truth lies locked in my religion.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Religions are equal; they are all directed at the same truth.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>God is only found in the meeting between religions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The way to real salvation is only to be found in dialogue between the religions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>The only way to true salvation is given to humankind in my religion.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>In the whole of religion, my religion is only one of the ways to salvation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Compared with my religion, the other religions contain only part of the truth.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>My religion forms the most valuable way to truth compared with the other religions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>All religions are equally valuable; they are different ways to the same salvation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>My religion contains the one, true light of redemption.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>The real truth can only be discovered in communication between religions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Before finding authentic (real) redemption, religions must enter into dialogue with each other.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Compared to the other religions, my religion contains the supreme salvation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Only in my religion can people receive true salvation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>There is no difference between religions, they all stem from a longing for God.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and statements 4, 5, 12 and 13 what we have termed the *dialogical-pluralist* view. Furthermore, note the formal character of these statements. In line with our theoretical approach, these statements do not refer to specific religions or world views, but only to religion or religions as such. On a five-point Likert scale, the students were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the beliefs or convictions expressed by these sixteen statements. This enables us to determine the students’ interreligious
orientations by simply calculating the mean scores for each scale. These mean scores thus express the extent to which the students agree or disagree with the exclusivist view, the inclusivist view, the pluralist view and the view labelled dialogical pluralism.

4. RESULTS

As part of a large-scale inquiry into religious and moral orientations of Dutch students, a questionnaire containing the above instrument, along with others, was administered to a sample of 974 students attending Catholic schools with pre-university (VWO) and/or pre-college (HAVO) programmes. The students filled out the questionnaire in December 1997 and January 1998 in one of their classes on world view/social studies. A check of the completed questionnaires showed that there were few unanswered items and that there were scarcely any questionnaires that had been filled out in an untrustworthy fashion. Of the 974 students, 44% were boys and 56% were girls; 42% were 16, 46% were 17 and 12% were 18 years old. And although 20% defined themselves as Catholic, 57% indicated that they seldom or never attend church.

We present the results regarding the students’ interreligious orientations in three steps. To begin, we report on the students’ views as such, by presenting the results of factor analysis, their mean scores on the respective scales as well as the correlations between these scales. Second, we focus on the social location of the students’ interreligious orientations by looking for possible associations between these orientations and other student characteristics. And to conclude this presentation of our research findings, we also examine whether some of these student characteristics can in fact be considered predictors for the students’ interreligious orientations. The latter we will do through the use of regression analysis.

4.1. Students’ interreligious orientations

Before we can calculate the students’ mean scores, we first have to check whether the four scales we distinguished in the theoretical domain are also present empirically. And as factor analysis reveals (cf. Table 1), this is not the case. Empirically we find only three factors. Although we theoretically distinguished between an exclusivist and an inclusivist view, our students did not make this distinction. For them, both views grouped together in a single view, which we will now call the monistic view. The reason for labelling this single factor thus is that this grouping together
of the exclusivist and inclusivist models seems to confirm Knitter’s (1995, 28; cf. also section 2.2.) notion of salvational ‘monism’. According to Knitter, the difference between exclusivism and inclusivism is only one of degree, because underlying both views is essentially the principle that ultimate salvation can only be found in one’s own religion. In contrast, the theoretical distinction we made between pluralism and dialogical pluralism does indeed have an empirical correlate in the students’ minds. In sum, empirically we find three instead of four distinct views about the relationship between religions: a monistic orientation, a pluralist orientation and a dialogical-pluralist orientation.

Having identified these three interreligious orientations as part of the students’ religious consciousness, the next step is to calculate the students’ mean scores in order to determine to what extent the students agree or disagree with these orientations. As Table 2 shows, our students value the pluralist orientation most positively (mean 3.4), they are ambivalent about the dialogical-pluralist orientation (mean 2.7) and they clearly disagree...
with the monistic orientation (mean 2.0). This picture is also partially confirmed by the correlation matrix for these three orientations (cf. Table 3). That is, the monistic orientation, which is rejected by our students, does not correlate with any other orientation and even correlates negatively with its theoretical counterpart, i.e. the pluralist orientation, thereby again underscoring that this is indeed a distinct view of the relationship between religions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean scores interreligious orientations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluralist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogical-pluralist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlation matrix interreligious orientations (r)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monistic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluralist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogical-pluralist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2. Social location of the students’ interreligious orientations

Following the presentation of the students’ interreligious orientations as such, we now turn to the social location of these orientations. We ask: What kind of students agree or disagree with these various orientations? In order to answer this question, we went in search of possible associations between the students’ interreligious orientations and other student characteristics. Important variables we considered in this respect were gender, nationality, moral behaviour, moral orientations, attitude toward environmental issues, political preference, religious belief, God images, church membership, church attendance, religious salience and religious socialization. As shown in Table 4, relevant associations were found to exist with the following variables: religious belief, church membership, political preference, father’s nationality, mother’s nationality and respondent’s nationality. However, before we discuss the social location of the students’ interreligious orientations, it is important to note that we originally measured these variables using more differentiated scales (cf. note 5), but, as table 4 also shows, for convenience the original scales were converted
into the following dichotomies: religious belief (non-believers versus believers), church membership (non-church-members versus church members), political preference (left versus right) and father’s, mother’s and respondent’s nationality (Dutch versus non-Dutch).9

### Table 4. Interreligious orientations and student characteristics (group mean scores and eta)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious belief</th>
<th>Church membership</th>
<th>Political preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Believers</td>
<td>Believers Eta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monistic</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.1 .16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluralist</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.5 .15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogical-pluralist</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.9 .21*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Father’s nationality</th>
<th>Mother’s nationality</th>
<th>Respondent’s nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Non-Dutch</td>
<td>Eta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monistic</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.5 .18*</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluralist</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.5 .03</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogical-pluralist</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.1 .11*</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between groups

When we confined ourselves to those significant associations with a strength of .10 or more (eta ≥ .10),10 we found that the monistic students tended to be believers, church members, on the political right, have two non-Dutch parents and not be Dutch themselves. Likewise, pluralists also tended to be believers, but in contrast to the monistic students pluralists were more likely to be on the political left. Finally, the dialogical-pluralists are more likely to be believers as well as church members, and to have a father whose nationality is not Dutch.

### 4.3. Predictors of the students’ interreligious orientations

The above picture of the social location of the students’ interreligious orientations only shows where the so-called monists, pluralists and dialogical-pluralists can be found in our sample, but it does not offer any causal explanation of these interreligious orientations. Hence, the fact that we
find associations between the monistic model and the political right, for example, does not necessarily mean that a preference for the political right also predicts a monistic interreligious orientation. In order to make such a prediction or to be able to say that the variability in the students’ interreligious orientations can be accounted for by these student characteristics, we have to use regression analysis as an additional statistical technique. The results of regression analysis are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Regression analysis interreligious orientations and student characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Monistic</th>
<th>Pluralist</th>
<th>Dialogical-pluralist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious belief</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church membership</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political preference</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s nationality</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s nationality</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s nationality</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monistic</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluralist</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogical-pluralist</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. R^2</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the basis of regression analysis, we thus can now say that the monistic orientation is partly a negative effect of the pluralist approach and partly a positive effect of the dialogical-pluralist approach. Furthermore, this monistic orientation can also be accounted for in a positive way by both church membership and a preference for the political right. In sum, a negative attitude towards pluralism and a positive attitude towards dialogical-pluralism together with membership in a church and a preference for the political right are predictors of a monistic orientation toward religious plurality. The pluralist orientation can also be considered a positive effect of the dialogical-pluralist approach, but it is a negative effect of the monistic approach. Apart from this, however, the pluralist orientation can also be accounted for in a positive way by both religious belief and a preference for the political left. Thus predictors of a pluralist orientation toward religious plurality are a positive attitude towards dialogical-pluralism, a negative attitude towards monism, belief in the existence of God or a transcendent reality, and a preference for the political left. Finally, the dialogical-plu-
ralist orientation is a positive effect of the pluralist approach and to a lesser degree also of the monistic approach. Besides this, dialogical-pluralism can also be accounted for, although to a very limited degree, by the nationality of the respondent’s father. This means that a positive attitude towards both pluralism and monism together with having a ‘non-Dutch’ father are predictors for a dialogical-pluralist orientation toward religious plurality.

5. DISCUSSION

In conclusion, we will now critically reflect on our research findings. We begin by looking at the students’ interreligious orientations as such and considering some of the consequences of the students’ preference for the pluralist model, after which we try to explain why the students favour the pluralist model over the other interreligious models.

5.1. Consequences of the pluralist orientation

Our findings clearly indicate that the students participating in our research rejected any monistic approach to the problem of religious plurality, that they were ambivalent about the dialogical-pluralist approach, and that they favoured the pluralist approach. That is, they basically are of the opinion that all religions are equally valid expressions of basic, human experiences of the transcendent and that it is not necessary, in this regard, to engage in dialogue with other believers in order to find religious truth. This preference for the so-called pluralist model, however, is not without consequences. Let us point out three rather far-reaching implications with regard to church policy, theology and religious education.

If we confine ourselves for a moment to the Roman Catholic Church’s response to religious plurality, it is clear that the Church’s policy is no longer in keeping with the religious consciousness of present-day youth. Although today religious plurality is high on the Vatican’s agenda and Pope John Paul II has made a point of meeting with leaders of other religions, the ecclesiastic documents are nevertheless expressions of the inclusivist model. That is to say, other religions are respected and valued only insofar as they reflect something of the truth of Jesus Christ. As we have seen above, a recent example of this line of thought is the declaration Dominus Iesus issued in 2000 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. While pluralism is fully acknowledged therein, the distinction made between theological faith, which concerns the acceptance of the
truth of Christ’s revelation, and belief, as a basic religious experience originating from the human search for God or the absolute (cf. Dominus Iesus, no. 7), ensures that the differences between Christianity and other religions are firmly upheld. Hence the respect paid to other religions by the Vatican is only partial and no attempt is made to understand other religions on the basis of their own presuppositions. In terms of the phases of the process of interreligious dialogue, we can say that the Roman Catholic Church concerns itself with the exchange of information with other religious traditions, but not with the exchange of perspectives, let alone the coordination of perspectives (cf. section 2.4.). In short, as far as religious plurality is concerned the prime focus of the policy of the Roman Catholic Church is on mission, understood as evangelization (cf. Race 2001, 106-109). And, as our research findings indicate, it is exactly this policy that is no longer acceptable to present-day young people who are the potential church members of tomorrow.

Apart from church policy, however, our research findings also affect the so-called ‘theology of religions’. In opposition to the absolutist and monistic truth claims underlying the exclusivist and inclusivist models and also to avoid the dangers of religious relativism attached to the pluralist model, a number of theologians today stress the importance of interreligious dialogue as a way to finding religious truth. Representatives of such a dialogical strand of the theology of religions, such as Knitter (1995), do not claim in advance that all religions are equally valid, but rather hold that the truth and validity of the claims raised by the different religions needs to be established through dialogue. Thus interreligious dialogue aims at the critical appraisal of all preliminary, religious truth claims in order to find religious truth (cf. Hobson & Edwards 1999, 57-61), which requires a certain degree of what Race (2001, 108) calls ‘epistemological modesty’. But notwithstanding the popularity of this approach among contemporary theologians of religion, it does not please our students. Instead of opting for this model our students favour the pluralist model. It is sufficient, according to them, simply to acknowledge that different religions exist and, subsequently, that all these different religions are equally valid and valuable. In contrast, a critical appraisal of different religions as well as a joint search for religious truth by way of interreligious dialogue is not something our students consider of much importance. Thus our findings not only indicate that there is no basis among present-day young people for the official policy of the Roman Catholic Church with regard to religious plurality but, surprisingly, that the theological critics of this policy also cannot count on much juvenile support.
This brings us to the implications of our research findings for religious education. If we take the students’ preference for the pluralist model seriously, we must conclude that they would favour some kind of religious studies programme. In the literature such an approach is known as *education about religion*. By presenting, descriptive accounts of the major world religions or world views, education about religion aims to inform students about various religions, to make them familiar with the different truth claims underlying these various religions and to assess these truth claims critically (cf. Ziebertz 1994, 235-239). Thus the educational aims of this approach primarily relate to the cognitive domain. Students are not addressed in a personal way nor are they challenged to consider the possible meaning of certain religious elements in view of their personal lives. With regard to the latter aspect in particular, this approach to religious education is heavily criticized by several religious pedagogues. According to its critics, religious education in school should be aimed first and foremost at helping young people develop a personal philosophy of life, and this aim certainly is not compatible with a strict emphasis on the knowledge aspect of religion alone (cf. Hobson & Edwards 1999, 15-16; Westerman 2001, 139-177, 215-219; Pieper & Vermeer 2001, 56-57). But although the ‘education about religion’ approach is rightly criticized in this respect, it is nevertheless the educational approach our students would seem to prefer given their preference for the pluralist model. Thus our findings confront religious educators with a real dilemma. On the one hand, they cannot neglect the educational principle that the objectives and contents of an educational programme must reflect the needs and interests of students; on the other hand such a programme would be a religious education programme that would fall short of contemporary religious-pedagogical demands.

As this brief discussion shows, the way our students tend to deal with religious plurality is not without consequences. Not only does their preferred model conflict with church policy and with current approaches in the theology of religions, but it also contrasts with the call for a more pedagogically oriented approach to religious education. It is highly questionable whether Dutch classrooms will indeed become important places for intercultural and interreligious dialogue, as we stated in the introduction. Since, as it turns out, young people today simply are not particularly interested in dialogue. Why not? This is the question we address in the second part of the discussion.
5.2. Pluralism: a psychosocial explanation

The question of why the students favour the pluralist model is not easy to answer. Neither social location nor the predictors of the students’ inter-religious orientations offer clear explanations in this respect. In general, it appears that the acceptance of the pluralist model can only be explained in terms of the students’ acceptance or rejection of the other models (cf. Table 5), which does not get us any further. Therefore, we went in search of an alternative explanation and found that commitment may very well be the keyword.

To explain this, let us first refer to a kind of paradox revealed by our findings. On the one hand, it is very clear that we are seeing a positive valuation of religious plurality – something also underscored by the fact that the pluralist orientation can be considered a positive effect of the dialogical-pluralist orientation as well as a negative effect of the monistic orientation. This makes sense: if one values religious plurality positively, one cannot agree with the monistic model. But, on the other hand, we also discovered that the dialogical-pluralist orientation can be considered a positive effect of the monistic orientation, and vice versa, which at the level of theological content seems rather strange. Whereas the monistic model is based on the assumption that there is only one religious truth, the dialogical-pluralist model is based on the assumption that religious truth has yet to be established. Still, what both models share is that man as a religious believer is committed to religious truth, and to finding religious truth. Our hypothesis is that this latter aspect does not apply to our students. Our students accept religious plurality as a sociological fact, but they do not want to commit themselves to finding religious truth. Rather they tend to adopt an non-committal attitude toward religion. That is to say, although the students favouring the pluralist model are inclined to believe in the existence of God or a transcendent reality, they do not consider themselves as members of a church or as part of a larger religious community (cf. Table 5). They tend to approach religion from a kind of ‘neutral’ third-person perspective and not as something that directly affects their personal lives. And it is precisely this refusal to commit oneself in a religious sense, we believe, that causes our students to reject the monistic model, because this model presupposes a strong religious commitment. It is also what causes them to be ambivalent toward the dialogical-pluralist model, because this model not only entails a positive valuation of religious plurality but also calls for religious commitment. If this unwillingness to commit oneself religiously is indeed a plausible explanation of why the students
favour the pluralist model, the next question is: Why do our students opt for such an attitude of non-commitment?

An obvious explanation for this may be the secular nature of Dutch society. In a society in which, according to the latest figures of the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, October 13, 2003), approximately 38% of the adult population has no religious affiliation whatsoever, it is not surprising that such a more or less phenomenological approach to religion should prevail. But although this looks like a very plausible explanation, it cannot fully account for our findings. Using the same measuring instrument, one of the authors also conducted research into the interreligious orientations of young people in South Africa, which yielded almost identical results (cf. Dreyer et al. 1999). Despite the fact that the South African society is a religious society, South African youth also appear to favour the pluralist model and also reject any monistic or absolutist orientation. It therefore must be considered unlikely that it is the secular nature of Dutch society that causes Dutch youngsters to favour the pluralist model. Rather, this preference for the pluralist model must be due to a factor that influences both Dutch and South African youth to the same extent. Given that the groups were comparable in terms of age and educational level, we next hypothesize that the level of psychological development may be an important factor. To explain this, we make use of Erikson’s psychosocial theory of identity formation.

The students participating in our research were in the 16 to 18-year-old age range, and thus fall into the adolescent category. A typical feature of this stage in the life cycle is that adolescents have difficulty committing themselves personally to aspects of adult life such as sexuality, friendship, vocation, faith and politics. It is for this reason that Erikson (1968, 128-135) described adolescence as a time of crisis between identity and identity confusion. According to Erikson, by overcoming several existential crises the school-age child age has acquired a provisional identity, which is challenged anew during adolescence when the young person leaves the childhood milieu behind and enters society, which confronts him or her with a set of new societal demands ranging from the choice of an occupation to adapting to sexual roles. This process is accompanied by much stress and uncertainty, because the adolescent fears the loss of identity. To describe the possible ways in which adolescents may deal with this tension or ‘crisis’ between identity and identity confusion, later researchers, in line with Erikson’s theoretical framework, referred to four identity statuses: identity achievement, foreclosure, diffusion and moratorium (cf. Hoover, Marcia & Parris 1997, 31-43). Identity achievement is
the status whereby the adolescent has successfully conquered the crisis between identity and identity confusion. The adolescent has for instance committed himself or herself to new vocational and social relationships, which results in a new sense of competence, and attaches personal meaning to these relationships, which results in a sense of integrity; competence and integrity being the two identity elements distinguished by Erikson (cf. Hoover et al. 1997, 19). The status *foreclosure* and *diffusion*, in contrast, refer to an unsuccessful resolution of the crisis between identity and identity confusion. Foreclosure means that an identity is not achieved but conferred on the adolescent from the outside, for instance by parents or as a result of social pressures, while diffusion points at the status whereby the adolescent has not succeeded in forming an identity. The ‘diffused’ adolescent is unable to find meaningful attachments in life or cannot develop a personal philosophy of life, which results in a lack of competence and integrity. The fourth and final status being distinguished here is called identity *moratorium*, which is characterized by experimentation and exploration. That is to say, the adolescent is working his or her way through the identity crisis without yet engaging in fixed and stable attachments and commitments. Rather the adolescent is involved in testing various kinds of possible attachments for the future.

With the help of this psychosocial theory of identity formation, it is possible to explain why the students participating in our research favoured the pluralist model above all others. We hypothesize that they do this because most of them are in a moratorium status. As a rule, they perceive religion as a cultural phenomenon – as something that is part of society and hence worthy of interest but that does not relate to their personal lives. That is to say, as far as religion is concerned, our students have not yet made up their minds. They are inclined to accept the existence of God or some other transcendent reality, but at the same time clearly reject any firm commitment to a single religious tradition, as expressed by the monistic model. They also have doubts about the necessity of interreligious dialogue, precisely because this presupposes a certain degree of commitment toward a religious tradition. Therefore, our students opt for a position of non-commitment, expressed in the pluralist model, which offers them the greatest latitude for establishing their own position with regard to religion. We thus consider our students’ preference for the pluralist model a youth phenomenon. However, unlike Nipkow (1994, 224-225), who contends that the religious consciousness of present-day youth basically consists of an ‘anything goes mentality’ devoid of theological content, we do not consider this to be the core issue. In our opinion, this attitude is not so much
Looking at the Relationship Between Religions

a matter of belief without content as it is a matter of belief without commitment. We contend that young people’s psychosocial development is at the moratorium stage and that they simply have not decided yet. Therefore, their preference for a relativistic and pluralist stance towards religion reflects neither an a priori acceptance nor an a priori rejection of religious faith. On the contrary, it only reflects our students’ indecision about religious matters as a basic characteristic of the moratorium status. Whether this may develop into some kind of religious commitment in adulthood we do not know. We do know that some day our students will have to choose a personal philosophy of life in order to overcome this moratorium, but whether this personal philosophy of life will be of a religious nature we cannot say. We simply hypothesize that the pluralist orientation of our students may very well be a feature of the moratorium status typical of adolescents.

Notes

1. According to the latest figures of the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, October 13, 2003), available through the internet (cf. www.cbs.nl), the percentage of the Dutch population with a Muslim background increased from 4.1% in 1995 to 5.7% in 2003. The researchers of the CBS attribute this increase to the growing number of non-Western immigrants, of whom 54% identify themselves as Muslim, as well as to the higher birth rate among Turks and Moroccans. Of non-Western Muslims in the Netherlands, 38% belong to the second generation who were born in the Netherlands. Although there are no exact data available on the religious background of the Dutch student population, we believe that on the basis of figure like these it is justified to say that the growing proportion of students from countries that are primarily Muslim, such as Turkey and Morocco, in Dutch secondary schools translates into a growing number of Muslim students.

2. Allochthonous pupils are not distributed evenly among all Dutch schools. Especially in the four largest cities in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague), certain schools are attended almost exclusively by allochthonous pupils, which of course limits the opportunities for intercultural and interreligious dialogue in these schools.

3. To be very clear, we do not claim that problems in the integration of allochthones in Dutch society originate in interreligious conflict or to problems in the relationship between Islam and the Western world. As explained elsewhere (cf. Van der Ven 2002, 247-248), the issue of social integration and social cohesion is a complex issue made up of many different factors. Religious and cultural differences along with joblessness, lack of education and poverty result in the development of an allochthonous sub-class whose members face obstacles to participating fully in Dutch society. It is important not to overestimate the influence of religion in this regard and not to ‘religionize’ this complex issue.

4. Sometimes an additional phase, called ‘comparison’ is added between ‘information exchange’ and ‘perspective exchange’, in order to stress the importance of looking for similarities and differences during the process of interreligious dialogue (cf. Van der Ven 2002, 252).

5. Religious self-definition was as follows: 20% Roman Catholic, 5% Protestant/Christian, 2% other faiths, 5% believers, 28% agnostic, 19% non-believers and 20% atheist. In addition, the students described their church attendance as regular (9%), occasional (34%) and seldom or never (57%). Note that our sample contains few if any students from a Muslim or Hindu
background. This is probably due to the fact that allochthonous students in particular attend lower-level secondary schools and are underrepresented at the higher-level secondary schools from which our sample was drawn (cf. Tesser et al. 1999, 167-169).

6. This factor solution differs somewhat from the solution presented elsewhere (cf. Pieper & Vermeer 2001, 64-65). This is due to the use of different techniques. Pieper and Vermeer used principal component analysis (varimax rotation, missing listwise, eigenvalue = 1, factor load >.40, N = 377), while we use principle axis factoring (PAF).

7. The only problem here is that item 7 ("In the whole of religion, my religion is only one of the ways to salvation"), which is meant to represent the pluralist orientation, does not load on any factor. Thus we are forced to leave this statement out of further analysis.

8. Such a differentiated scale was not used with the variables relating to nationality. To determine the nationality of the student and his/her parents, we used an open question, asking the respondent to fill in his/her own nationality and that of his/her father and mother. Later we turned this into the dichotomy ‘Dutch’ and ‘non-Dutch’.

9. The value labels assigned to these new, dichotomized variables are as follows: religious belief: ‘non-believers’ 1, ‘believers’ 2; church membership: ‘non-church members’ 1, ‘church members’ 2; political preference: ‘left’ 1, ‘right’ 2; father’s, mother’s and respondent’s nationality: ‘Dutch’ 1, ‘non-Dutch’ 2.

10. Because we dichotomized these variables in this way, we had to use the eta coefficient as a measure of association. The eta coefficient is used if the dependent variable is measured on an interval scale and the independent variable on a nominal scale.

11. The variables were entered into the equation using the stepwise method, meaning that all the beta’s shown are significant.

12. Such an attitude is expressed very clearly by the items of our measuring instrument representing the pluralist approach. With the exception of item 7 (cf. section 3 and especially note 7), the other three items representing this approach, i.e. items 3, 10 and 16, are all stated in neutral and descriptive terms. In this respect, it is remarkable also that the students agree most strongly with precisely these three items.

LITERATURE


Opvattingen van jongeren in Rotterdam [Islam in a multicultural society. Views of young people in Rotterdam]. Utrecht: European Research Centre on Migration and Ethnic Relations.


——. (2002). Teologie beoefenen in een faculteit voor religiewetenschappen [Practicing theology in a faculty of religious studies]. In: Tijdschrift voor Theologie, 42, 3, 244-267.


Paul Vermeer is assistant professor of Empirical Practical Theology at the University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

Johannes A. van der Ven is professor of Empirical Practical Theology at the University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

Their adress is: Radboud University Nijmegen, Erasmusplein 1, 6525 HT Nijmegen, The Netherlands.