Christianity and Buddhism in Belgian Religion Education before and after Vatican II

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ABSTRACT
En este artículo pretendo indagar en la imagen del budismo en la educación religiosa católica belga antes y después del Concilio Vaticano II (1962-1965), desde 1870 hasta 2000, partiendo del análisis de los libros de texto belgas de religión católica para educación secundaria. Para ello, aplicaré un análisis descriptivo-hermenéutico de contenido en el que, en primer lugar, investigaré cómo se representa el budismo en los libros de texto como credo, código, comunidad y culto. En segundo lugar, y en relación con lo anterior, trataré de determinar el paradigma teológico subyacente que ha conformado esta imagen. Con este fin, apelaré a diversos constructos teológicos contemporáneos, como el "inclusivismo" y el "exclusivismo", que considero de gran utilidad a la hora de evaluar el posicionamiento interreligioso e intercultural de la Iglesia Católica en la educación. A pesar de que se han otorgado a estos conceptos significados, en cierto modo, diferentes en la bibliografía especializada, creo que estos dos "conceptos sensibilizadores" se pueden aunar dentro de la siguiente definición práctica. Con "inclusivismo" me refiero al modelo teológico en el que se reconoce que otras religiones pueden estar en posesión de una verdad parcial y contar con cierta posibilidad de salvación, a condición de que Jesucristo sea el elemento constitutivo y fundamental de dicha verdad y salvación. Con "exclusivismo" me refiero al modelo teológico que establece que la cristianidad posee el monopolio exclusivo de la verdad y la salvación. Mediante la aplicación de estos conceptos teológicos amplios y unificadores al análisis de los libros de texto, pretendo hacer una humilde contribución a la historia de la teología de las religiones en la educación católica belga y la propia Iglesia Católica durante el periodo objeto de investigación. En la bibliografía teológica y educativa contemporánea, encontramos que la mayoría de los autores son de la opinión de que el paradigma interreligioso dominante en la Iglesia Católica y la educación era de naturaleza "exclusivista" antes del Concilio Vaticano II y se tornó "inclusivista" después de dicho concilio. Por contra, una minoría sostiene que el "inclusivismo" fue el paradigma dominante en la Iglesia Católica y su educación durante todo el periodo en investigación. El objetivo de mi análisis es otorgar mayor peso a una de estas dos posturas, al menos en lo que concierne a Bélgica.

Keywords: interreligious dialogue, vatican ii, christianity and buddhism, history of education.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper I want, starting from the analysis of Belgian Catholic religion textbooks for secondary education, from 1870 up to 1970, to explore the image of Buddhism in Belgian Catholic religion education before and after Vatican II (1962-1965). In doing so, I will make use of a descriptive hermeneutic content analysis wherein, firstly, it is investigated how Buddhism is represented in the textbooks as creed, code, community and cult. Secondly, and related to this, I will try to determine the underlying theological paradigm that has formatted this image. For that, I will make an appeal to a number of contemporary theological constructs, such as ‘inclusivism’ and ‘exclusivism’, which I believe lend themselves very well to the detection of the Catholic Church’s interreligious and intercultural positioning in education (Van Wiele, 2011). Although somewhat different meanings for these concepts are given in the scholarly literature, I think one can fit these two ‘sensitizing concepts’ into the following working definition. By ‘inclusivism’ I refer to the theological model in which it is recognized that other religions may possibly possess partial truth and a certain possibility of salvation, on the condition that Jesus Christ functions as the norm and constitutive element of such truth and salvation. By ‘exclusivism I mean the theological model that sees Christianity as holding the exclusive monopoly on truth and salvation (Van Wiele, 2004). By employing these comprehensive and unifying theological concepts in the textbook analysis, I hope to make a modest contribution to the history of the theology of religions in Belgian Catholic education and the Catholic Church itself for the period under investigation (Van Wiele, 2014a). In the contemporary educational and theological literature, one finds that a majority of authors are of the opinion that the dominant interreligious paradigm in the Catholic Church and education prior to Vatican II was 'exclusivist' in nature and became 'inclusivist' after Vatican II (Hick, 1988, 1995; Klages, 1977; Knitter, 1995; Merrigan, 2007). A minority, on the other hand, holds that 'inclusivism' was the dominant paradigm within the Catholic Church and its education during the whole period under investigation (D'Costa, 1990; Panikkar, 1988). With my analysis I aim to lend greater weight to one of these two positions, at least as far as Belgium is concerned.

As far as the period before 1950 is concerned, the source material is restricted to textbooks of apologetics. One simple reason can be cited for this: in the corpus of religion textbooks used in secondary education, they alone make explicit statements concerning Buddhism. This kind of religion textbooks disappeared around 1950 in Belgian religion education as an apart kind of religion textbook (besides church history textbooks, textbooks on biblical history and 'devotional history', 'little' catechisms, ....)
and were then replaced by more broad, general and unified religion textbooks, wherein more can be found concerning non-Christian religions and which therefore form the corpus of the source material after 1950 (Van Wiele, 2007).

Why do I base this research on textbooks (Van Wiele, 2008, 2011, 2014b)? Because textbooks are considered to be part of the micropedagogical level, which itself is a blend of networks and structures finding their origin on the macro- and mesopedagogical levels (policy guidelines from governmental and educational bodies, prevailing pedagogical and ideological goals, ...) of an entire educational system (Depaepe & Simon, 2003). If, besides, in line with certain trends in educational historiography (Depaepe, 2006, 2008, 2010a, 2010b), one defines an educational system as a 'school culture', more specifically, as an entirety of values, norms, and expectations that is determining for the self-identity of a school and for the activities of its members (Kelty, 2000), then it is self-evident that the textbook, as an 'intersection' of an entire 'school culture' (Tyack & Tobin, 1994), is a privileged source for finding the large 'structures' or mentalities and identities that are constitutive of a 'school culture'. In that way, with the religious textbook as a central source, I want to trace some of the large structures of the 'grammar of schooling' that provided the format for Catholic interreligious and intercultural education in Belgium in the past.

2 MAIN RESULTS

When we take a closer look at the Belgian textbooks for the entire period under investigation, we first of all notice a great deal of continuity. Buddhism is approached from a Christian ‘inclusivist’ theology of religions in which Christianity is seen as the religion that possesses the ‘fullness’ of truth and that represents the normal salvific path. Buddhism, like the other major non-Christian religions, displays many truthful and noble elements, but to a lesser extent than Christianity. Nevertheless, there is definitely discontinuity as well, more specifically with Vatican II (1962-1965) as a tipping point. For around the time of this Ecumenical Council and in the years that follow, the textbooks gradually reveal a tendency to put more emphasis on dialogue and what unites Buddhism with Christianity, rather than on what distinguishes these religions from one another, although the textbooks continue to build on fundamentally the same theological ‘inclusive’ principles as before. In order to gain a better insight into the constants and evolutions, I divide the period under investigation into a subperiod before Vatican II (1870-1950) and a subperiod during and after Vatican II (1950-1970). For each of these subperiods, I discuss a number of concise text fragments from the textbooks and explain them further in light of the historical and societal context.
2.1 BUDDHISM AS A DARK MIRROR OF CHRISTIANITY

In the period occurring between 1870 and 1950, in spite of the underlying ‘inclusivist’ paradigm, the image of Buddhism in the textbooks is predominantly negative. This is primarily due to the fact that Buddhism in this period was only discussed in the so-called ‘apologetic’ textbooks, intended for religious education in the higher years of secondary education. A classic aspect of this apologetic approach is the desire to show the truthfulness of Christianity in response to external attacks. Although, historically considered, ‘apologetic’ approaches of the Christian faith are as old as Christianity itself (Dulles, 1971), the type we find in the textbooks of the 19th and first half of the 20th century is ‘contextualised’ (Van Wiele, 2011). Unlike the Christian apologists active in the first centuries of Christianity, who wanted to defend the truth claims of the Christian religion against ‘pagan’ and Jewish schools of thought, the textbook authors of this period now go on the defensive in order to counter some of the rationalistic and naturalistic currents of the time, which arose from Enlightenment thinking and which are generalisingly labelled as ‘modernism’ in the textbooks (Berger, 1999; Graf, 1998; Hill, 2002; Ladous, 2000; Schneider, 1998; Talar, 1999). On this basis, the textbook authors react in particular against certain trends in the comparative science of religion (Sharpe, 1994) that was on the rise at the time. Specifically, they opposed the trend to relativise the uniqueness of Christianity on the basis of confirmed or presumed parallels between Christianity and other religions (Cabanel, 1994; Cracknell, 1995; Kenis & van der Wall, 2010), especially Buddhism, by characterising all religions as fundamentally equal and parallel truth systems and salvific paths, which only appear to differ from one another because of culturally determined differences and externalisations. The consequence of such an apologetic and polemical approach is that during the presentation of Buddhism, the emphasis is placed on differences rather than on similarities with Christianity. This apologetic approach was very much present in the official Catholic Belgian, German and French Church histories and dogmatic treatises (e.g. Von Schanz, 1891, Wilbois, 1948) that surrounded the Belgian religion textbooks. These treatises were in turn based on an apologetic reading of more scientific overviews of Buddhism (e.g. De Harlez, 1894; Rhys Davids, 1914).

Further on, the missionary factor. In the 19th and early 20th century, many European – and also Belgian – Catholic congregations were active in Buddhist regions in Asia, including China, Korea, Tibet and Vietnam, where they proclaimed the Christian faith by providing health care and education (e.g. De Letter, 1932). During this period, certain variants of Buddhism manifested themselves in these areas as dangerous competitors of Christianity, sometimes even by violently threatening the local Christian population. One example is the so-called ‘Boxer Rebellion’ in China in 1900, in which tens of thousands of mainly indigenous Chinese Christians were killed in response to a perceived threat, real or not, posed by Christianity and/or ‘the West’ against traditional Chinese Buddhist and Confucian views on politics, economy, religion, etc. I cannot deal with the discussion here whether or not Christianity and the West
are to be blamed for these kinds of upheavals, but what counts here is that detailed accounts of this massacre were given in the Belgian missionary magazines and brochures of the time (e.g. De Schaepdryver, 1927), and the impact of this event on religious education – which in Belgium was often provided by the missionary congregations – should not be underestimated. It could easily result in an image of Buddhism in the textbooks that was not very positive.

On this apologetic, anti-modernist and missionary basis, the textbook authors present an image of Buddhism that above all makes clear what they consider to be the radical differences with Christianity in terms of religious doctrine, morality and religious rites. Nevertheless, the underlying theological paradigm remains ‘inclusivist’, since it is still recognized that Buddhism and other religions possess a grain of truth (e.g. Berquin, 1942; Frutsaert, 1931; Lambrecht, 1883; Minnaers, 1924; Rutten, 1897; Verhelst, 1915, 1918). Just a very few concise examples from their varied assortment of views. In terms of religious doctrine, Buddhism does not actually provide a well-defined set of beliefs, in a manner that is incompatible with Christianity (Van Brabant & Stock, 1942). Another incompatibility on the level of doctrine that is indicated: ancestral Buddhism does not actually mention the existence of a God or the existence of an immortal soul (e.g. Legrand, 1929). In the domain of morality, too, the authors mainly identify problematic inconsistencies with Christianity. Christianity seeks to extinguish all wicked passions and desires, to cultivate good passions, and stresses the importance of being actively involved in the world. Buddhism, on the other hand, again according to the textbook authors, wants to literally extinguish all passions – including the good ones – which leads to passivity, indifference, and resignation (e.g. Valvekens, 1909). Besides providing a list of irreducible differences, the textbook authors occasionally – and to a lesser extent – also underline some similarities with Christianity. I name just a few. One author praises the peacefulness of Buddhism because, similarly to Christianity and unlike Islam, whose missionisation was carried out with the sword, the missionisation of Buddhism took place peacefully and swiftly on the basis of the persuasiveness of its preachers (Valvekens, 1909). Another author underlines, as a positive parallel between Buddhism and Christianity, how serious consideration is given to all forms of suffering faced by man (Legrand, 1929). Both authors also refer – with or without the help of additional examples – to the pursuit of very noble virtues in both religions, such as detachment from the earthly, chastity, gentleness, condemnation of hatred and anger, the prohibition on killing, contemplation, the search for wisdom, etc.

2.2 BUDDHISM AS PARTNER IN DIALOGUE WITH CHRISTIANITY

Around the time of Vatican II, the treatment of Buddhism in the textbooks undergoes a number of changes, without, however, losing the ‘inclusivist’ theological principles from the previous period. First of all, the approach becomes less apologetic (Van Wiele, 2016). The textbook authors no longer present
Buddhism with the sole purpose of proving the superiority of Christianity, but generally begin their discussion of this religion with a brief and less evaluative science-of-religion-based overview of its origins, main religious representations, and ethical, ritual and societal aspects. As in the previous period, Buddhism is discussed mainly in the textbooks written for the highest years of Belgian secondary education of that time frame. Unlike in the previous period, however, this is no longer done in separate ‘apologetic’ textbooks – this type of textbook goes out of fashion in Belgian religious education in the 1950s – but in more ‘global’ textbooks that are in line with ‘modern’ theological attitudes, using an approach inspired by the so-called ‘nouvelle théologie’ (Routhier, Roy, Schelkens, 2011; Villanova, 1997), where the focus is more on contemporary life problems and whereby answers taken from the Gospel are discussed. Secondly, the parallels between Buddhism and Christianity now receive more attention, which, together with a less apologetic approach, leads to a more positive image of Buddhism. This is done without glossing over incongruities, however. More than in the previous period, both religions are now presented as the result of the human search for answers to the larger questions of life, yet the norm for religious truth remains Christianity. Because of all the truthful and virtuous elements in Buddhism, this religion is now put more in the spotlight not only as a ‘praeparatio evangelii’ – a stepping stone for understanding and embracing the ‘fullness’ of the Christian truth (Bea, 1967), but also as a partner in dialogue in order to establish a peaceful world. Here also the textbook authors were not very original and their succinct notions on Buddhism can easily traced back to surrounding Catholic theologians dealing with Buddhism (e.g. de Lubac, 1952, van Straelen, 1966), who based themselves more and more on insights of the emerging field of scientific Buddhist studies (e.g. Conze, 1951; Lamotte, 1958), insights which were also available at that time in more popularizing scientific literature in Belgium (e.g. Neil, 1964; Ringgren & Ström, 1963).

Nevertheless, in the period 1950-1970 there is an internal evolution that takes place, with Vatican II as a tipping point. Up until the beginning of Vatican II (1962), the inclination was to put more emphasis on what distinguishes Buddhism and Christianity from each other (e.g. Peytier, 1954, 1958; Toussaint, 1953; van Caster, 1950, 1961). Concretely, this was done through an evaluation of Buddhism at the end of a brief and more neutral presentation of this religion in terms of its religious representations, ethics, and ritual and societal aspects, in which the authors of textbooks generally brought up a number of controversial issues in the dialogue with Christianity. It is only during and after Vatican II (1962-1965), in line of the authoritative texts promulgated during this ecumenical council (Alberigo & Komonchak, 1995, 2006; Lamberigts & Declerck, 2006; Roy, 2012) that we fully see an approach emerge to put more emphasis on what unites Buddhism with Christianity, and a tendency to take this as the starting point in the textbooks (e.g. Dewandel & Dejonge, 1967, 1968; Hendrickx, 1968; Van Alphen, 1966), which
immediately makes the content less negative. A few excerpts from the textbooks can illustrate this evolution.

In the period before Vatican II, the textbook *Christ in Our World* (1961) – written by the Jesuit Marcel van Caster, and intended for religious education in the highest years of Belgian secondary education – contains a chapter on non-Christian religions that begins with Buddhism. Van Caster first lists, based on religious studies insights that were already generally accepted and known at the time, the most important biographical data on the founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, later called the ‘Buddha’ (= ‘the enlightened one’), insofar as the historical facts can be distinguished from myth formation regarding this person. The biographical data given by van Caster are clearly meant to play a part in demonstrating the fundamental religious insights of the Buddha. We read how Siddhartha, as a prince, supposedly led a life full of earthly pleasures until the moment when, through contact with an old man, a sick man and a corpse, he came to the insight that life is not always joyful. It is then noted that Siddhartha left the palace and withdrew into seclusion, until he reached ‘enlightenment’, and came to the conclusion that all life is suffering, that suffering is caused by cravings and desire, and that this suffering can only be stopped by separating oneself from all earthly pleasures through contemplation and gentleness, in order to enter Nirvana this way. Next, the textbook author briefly touches upon a fact which is important for the dialogue with Christianity: the Buddha does not actually deny the existence of God, and his teaching – in practice – amounts to a moral doctrine without religion.

Particularly indicative of van Caster’s attitude, however, is his evaluation of Buddhism at the end of his presentation. The key point of his assessment is that although Buddhism displays many noble elements, it remains too negative. Van Caster lists several elements to prove this. For example, Buddhism knows ‘no redemption from sin; because it seeks only deliverance from suffering’. Moreover, Buddhist solidarity is actually marked by pessimism: “helping others to rid themselves of all suffering and, to this end, of all desires”. In his view, the doctrine of Nirvana *is meagre as well*: “nothing positive is known about it; all we are told is that we will no longer be plagued by unhappiness there” (p. 232). Van Caster then contrasts these weaknesses of Buddhism with the ‘fullness’ of revelation in Christianity, in which a fully positive realisation of life can be found that offers the true path to deliverance from inadequacies and suffering – a salvific path in which Buddhism can find its completion, as it were. To substantiate this point he argues, among other things, that in Christianity, too, suffering can be meaningful – as well as redemptive – when it is experienced and borne after the example of, and in union with, Christ. Without much further explanation, he adds that this demeanour makes love, in its richest form, possible, which “sets us on the path to eternal positive happiness in union with God” (ibid.). By the latter he possibly means that the Christian understanding of salvation, which ultimately consists in the perpetual blissful
beholding of God, should not be expressed solely in negative terms, as is usually the case with Nirvana in Buddhism, which subsequently leaves no more room for any sort of joy or happiness.

The way in which the Jesuit Herman Hendrickx presents Buddhism, is representative of the partially different approach in the second part of this period, namely between 1962 and 1970. Even more emphasis is put here on similarities between Christianity and Buddhism in order to facilitate interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding, as was outlined by Nostra aetate, the Second Vatican Council’s document on the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions. Hendrickx starts from a positive attitude by pointing out the double attraction of Buddhism for Christians: “As a result of the doctrine of non-violence ... nearly all ... Buddhists ... are practical pacifists. They have no caste system and accept the fundamental equality of all human beings. This is why, in today’s world, Buddhism can with a certain right present itself as the gospel of peace. A second reason ... is its down-to-earth, practical mindset”. This is followed by a number of pages dedicated to a more systematic science-of-religion-based introduction to Buddhism and its variants, in which the author nevertheless makes clear to the pupils – through a list of mainly similarities but also differences – how Buddhism points in the direction of Christianity, in which this Eastern religion can find its completion.

A few examples. On the one hand, Hendrickx, by means of examples, gives a positive evaluation of original Buddhism as a reform of Brahmanism in which the Buddha turned away from polytheism, the complicated ceremonies of the Brahmins and the exaggerations of the Hindu ascetics. Yet at the same time the author states that the teachings of the Buddha are aristocratic – a doctrine for monks who withdrew into solitary meditation. He further characterises the famous doctrine of the ‘Four Noble Truths’ as an “impressive set of moral and psychological precepts, designed to help man to free himself from desire”, and in which benevolence occupies a prominent position. He adds, however, that this is a benevolence “without love, for this love is already a form of desire and thus a source of suffering”. In addition, when talking about compatibilities with Christianity, Hendrickx lists some developments within Mahayana Buddhism, such as the emergence of the concept of charity through the figure of the bodhisattva, the ‘enlightened one’ who, out of compassion for others, postpones his entry into Nirvana; and the development of the idea of God through the figure of the celestial bodhisattva, to whom one prays for salvation.

3 CONCLUSION

Thus far the situation for the period between 1870 and 1970. Contrary to what could be expected from the majority of authors, the dominant interreligious paradigm underlying the representation of Buddhism during the period under investigation turned out to be mostly ‘inclusivist’ instead of ‘exclusivist’ in nature, and this during the whole period in question. This opposes the view that
‘exclusivism’ was predominant within the Catholic Church and its education prior to Vatican II. This does not mean that there is no discontinuity: before Vatican II the focus in the textbooks is on the differences between Christianity and Buddhism, while around and after Vatican II there is a clear tendency towards emphasizing the compatibilities and parallels between both religions.
REFERENCE


