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Jan Van Wiele

## The Theology of Religions in Belgian Apologetic Textbooks for Adults (1870–1960)

### *Abstract*

*Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht das interreligiöse Paradigma in belgischen apologetischen Lehrbüchern für Erwachsene aus der Zeit zwischen 1870 und 1960. In einem ersten Schritt wird das Zielpublikum dieser Lehrbücher definiert und ihr Platz in der katholischen Religionslehre beschrieben. Anschließend wird ein kurzer Überblick über die verschiedenen theologischen Modelle in der zeitgenössischen wissenschaftlichen Literatur gegeben, um die interreligiösen Aussagen in den Lehrbüchern systematisch zu interpretieren und zu erklären. Um die genaue Reichweite des interreligiösen Paradigmas in apologetischen Lehrbüchern zu verstehen, wird dann ein kurzer Überblick über die Behandlung nichtchristlicher Religionen in katholischen Religionslehrbüchern anderer Lehrgebiete für Erwachsene gegeben. Daran schließt sich eine qualitativ-hermeneutische Analyse des interreligiösen Paradigmas in den apologetischen Lehrbüchern selbst an, wobei der Einfluss der Neuscholastik herausgestellt wird. In einem Fazit werden die wichtigsten Ergebnisse der Studie zusammengeführt und im Hinblick auf den Umgang mit anderen Religionen seit dem Zweiten Vatikanum interpretiert.*

### 1. Introduction

This paper examines the interreligious paradigm in Belgian apologetic textbooks for adults from the period between 1870 and 1960. In a first step, it defines the target audience of these textbooks and describes their place in Catholic religious education. Then, a brief overview of the various theological models in contemporary scholarly literature is provided in order to systematically interpret and explain the interreligious statements in the textbooks. In order to understand the precise scope of the interreligious paradigm in apologetic textbooks, a brief overview of the treatment of non-Christian religions in the surrounding Catholic adult religion textbooks is then provided. This is followed by a qualitative-hermeneutical analysis of the interreligious paradigm in the apologetic textbooks themselves, drawing attention to the influence of Neo-Scholasticism. In a conclusion, the main findings of the study are brought together and briefly interpreted in the perspective of the approach to other religions since Vatican II.

In collecting the source material, we consulted the Archive and Documentation Centre for the History of Education of the University of Louvain. All available editions of Belgian Catholic apologetic textbooks for adult religion education were consulted. If multiple manuals by one author were available, only the most comprehensive and the most relevant with regard to the topical range were retained. This resulted in a corpus of ten textbooks,

the oldest dating from 1872 and the youngest one from 1942. In order to compare them with new textbooks for religious education for adults in Belgium after the disappearance of this genre after 1950, only two of the most commonly used textbooks up to 1960 in Flanders were retained as a sample. Finally, in order to compare the apologetic textbooks with the surrounding church and religious history textbooks for adults, four commonly used manuals from these genres were also selected.

## 2. Theological instruction for adults

The apologetics textbooks from the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries were intended for the Catholic religion and moral education for the last year of the classical humanities (lasting 7 years), called rhetoric, a year that concluded the entire secondary education and, moreover, provided access to all continuing education at universities and colleges (see, e.g., Rutten, 1897, p. XI–XII). The students in these classes were at least between seventeen and eighteen years old. As such, these textbooks formed a kind of religious gateway to ‘adult life’ or what the textbooks themselves call “real life” or life after schooling at the secondary and higher levels. It is also indicative that many of these textbooks, in view of the educational curriculum, were also intended for philosophical education in seminaries, which was usually taken by students who were at least nineteen and twenty years old. This so-called philosophical education was intended as a kind of necessary preparation for ‘serious’ work (*philosophia ancilla theologiae*), that is, the study of Christian theology in the next three or four years, which was normally followed by people from the age of twentyone years old. Many authors of these textbooks explicitly state in their preface that their textbook, in terms of purpose and structure, is also intended for interested adult lay people, regardless of whether or not they have studied classical humanities and rhetoric. For example, the widely used textbook *Cours d’apologétique Chrétienne* (Course in Christian Apologetics) of the Jesuit Walter Devivier states in its preface that this work is not just meant to be used by priests, so as to have “a book at their disposal to remind them of the main truths they have been taught in their dogmatics classes” (1914, p. VII). Equally, the work is intended for families as a kind of “summary” of the theology that the laity have not been able to study in a complete way so that they can thus enable themselves to fathom the reasonableness of their faith (cp. *ibid.*).

These textbooks on apologetics for adults under examination form a distinct genre within the other textbooks on religion and moral education for adults, such as textbooks on biblical history, catechisms for adults, textbooks on fundamental theology and dogmatics, textbooks on church history and patrology, and textbooks on the comparative history of religion. Their origin must be situated in the context of the Catholic Church’s dealings with modernity (see also Van Wiele, 2023, pp. 273, 276). Although apologetics as a systematic defense of the Christian faith against external attacks is as old as Christianity itself (see, e.g., Cayré, 1933, pp. 21–22; Dulles, 1971, p. xiii ff.), this discipline has been actualized in a number of areas in the textbooks of the period under consideration (see, e.g., Lambrecht, 1883, pp. 5–8). Indeed, according to the authors, the main purpose of their textbooks is to defend, on the basis of *rational* arguments and insights from *modern human sciences*, the traditional uniqueness and truth claims of Christianity and the Catholic

Church against some then relativistic, fiercely persistent rationalist and naturalist currents of Enlightenment thinking (see also, e.g., Kenis, 1992).

Yet this method in itself is not so new. It goes back to Anselm of Canterbury's medieval adagium from the 11th Century "intellectus quaerens fidem, fides quaerens intellectum" ("understanding seeking faith, faith seeking understanding"). The first part belongs to the realm of *philosophy*: herein, purely on the basis of rational considerations, the reasonableness of faith and Christian revelation is explained and substantiated. The second part belongs to the domain of *theology*: herein, then, from a believing perspective, the further content of Christian faith and revelation is made intelligible as much as possible with the help of reason. For example, François Verhelst writes:

"Apologetics is by its very nature a science that precedes faith [...] Our argumentation must therefore derive from our knowledge acquired from our natural abilities which is logically distinct from the truths known only through [revealed; J.V.W.] faith. The proofs we shall adduce are derived exclusively from the certainties of the human sciences, especially philosophy and history" (1915, p. 6).<sup>1</sup>

Such textbooks on apologetics continued to exist as a separate genre until about 1950. After this, apologetics as a separate discipline apparently gradually loses some of its importance, but remained one of the tenets of Catholic education in religion and morality for quite some time.

This is made evident in part by the fact that from then on, up to 1960, the apologetic approach remained implicitly or explicitly present in the updated and more generally systematic theological and historical introductory textbooks in Catholic religion and morals for adults. At the same time, one also sees during this period that in the final year of high school, and also in seminaries for priests and in other institutions for adult education, new textbooks begin to replace the old apologetics textbooks, now focusing more on current intellectual and social life questions that young adults were facing. Illustrative of this is Peytier, who in his textbook from 1954, tellingly titled *God en de levensproblemen* (God and the Problems of Life), entrenches issues such as the relationship between faith and science, labor, property rights, church-state relations, charity, social justice, etc. (pp. 38–211).

### 3. Theological models

In order to describe and explain in some detail the complex view of the relationship between Christianity and other religions held by the authors of apologetic textbooks, I will draw on some of the distinct theological models that have been advanced in the leading educational and theological literature in recent decades. Specifically, one distinguishes three major models: namely, the exclusivist, the inclusivist and the pluralist. These models are usually centered around two major themes, namely the questions of the degree of truth and the degree of salvation in one's own and the other's religion. By using these two criteria, the three different models can be broadly formulated as follows: The position that values all the major world religions as more or less equal paths of salvation and in which Christ is seen as only one of many mediators of truth and salvation is called pluralistic

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Dutch and French into English by J.V.W.

(see, e.g., Hick, 1993, pp. 14–21; Knitter, 1987, pp. 178–198; 1995, pp. 26–27; Merrigan, 2000, pp. 61–82). Exclusivism can be formulated along the lines of Karl Barth (see, e.g., 1945, pp. 307–343) and Hendrik Kraemer (see, e.g., 1962) as the position that claims an explicit faith in Christ (and in his Church) and thus makes the presence of truth and salvation a fully Christian monopoly (see also Van Woudenberg, 1994, pp. 275–290; Ward, 2009, pp. 190–191). The position that considers all religious traditions as possible possessors of salvation and truth and at the same time sees Christ as the constitutive mediator of salvation and truth, i.e., not only normative in order to be allowed to speak of divine salvation and truth, but also indispensable for any realization of salvation and truth, we call inclusivist (see, e.g., D’Costa, 1990a, pp. 16–29; 1990b, pp. 130–143; Kasper, 2000, pp. 1–5; Rahner, 1962, pp. 136–158). Some make an additional distinction here between a ‘hard’ inclusivism, where the emphasis is on the content of belief (dogma, ethics, cult, etc.), and a ‘soft’ inclusivism, where the focus is more on the way in which one believes (the internal disposition, the existential act of believing) (see, e.g., Schineller, 1976, pp. 545–566).

#### 4. Theological models in co-texts

We cannot understand the approach and scope of the interreligious paradigm in apologetics textbooks without first taking a moment to consider how this is addressed in the other religion and morality textbooks for adults in Belgium that deal with non-Christian religions. Looking, for example, at the textbooks on church history or history of religion used in Belgian educational circles, it is not very clear exactly from which of the three interreligious paradigms mentioned above is being started. One finds few, if any, direct doctrinal statements about this in these textbooks. Exceptions here and there are some highly exclusivist-looking assertions, in the sense that Christianity is the only God-willed and true religion which, with the message of Jesus Christ, perfects and completes all other religions. Associated with this Christocentrism in terms of truth is then usually a form of ecclesiocentrism in terms of salvation, where it is stated that in order to be saved, one must normally belong to the Christian and more specifically the Catholic Church (*nulla salus extra ecclesiam*). Initiation into the Church is then through baptism and an exception here is the ‘baptism of desire’ which also grants direct access to divine grace and salvation. Otherwise, not so much attention is paid to non-Christian religions. A relative exception is Judaism and, to a lesser extent, Islam. The following is relevant to our questioning in this regard.

As for Judaism, a relatively large amount of attention is usually paid to it, which is not surprising given the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. In spite of all the variation and own insertions of the various authors of the textbooks, the main points of the treatment of the Jewish religion come down to the following. First, the original connection between Judaism and Christianity is emphasized, including that Jesus was Jewish and lived according to Jewish law, that the gospel was first preached to the Jews and that his first followers and also the first baptized were among the Jewish population, etc. (see, e.g., Labis, 1900, pp. 9–19, 22–24). In this context, Judaism is then identified in a fundamentally positive way as “the people of God” (see, e.g., Bellon, 1935, pp. 85–88). This is further framed in a classical Christian theology of revelation and salvation in three phases (see, e.g.,

Delogne, 1939, p. 55). In the first phase, God made Himself known to humanity through the “primitive revelation”. The second phase began after the Fall, in which God promised to send a savior who would definitively free humanity from slavery and sin. To this end, God chose the Jewish people with whom He entered into a covenant to know and worship Him permanently and who through the ages would continue to expect the savior or Messiah and from whom it would eventually be born. Therefore, God revealed Himself step by step through the prophets and other Bible saints and this true faith was recorded in the Old Testament. The third and final stage in divine revelation is then the coming of Jesus Christ to earth through which all the prophecies about the Messiah are realized and through which the fullness of divine truth and salvation is also communicated to the world.

From all this there is a great appreciation of the Jewish religion and the Jewish people as the chosen “people of God”, because in its original form it is regarded as a true and God-willed religion and institution of salvation (see also, e.g., Bea, 1967, pp. 42–48). With the coming and message of Jesus Christ, however, from the Jewish people themselves the original Jewish religion is then perfected, and certain forms of the Jewish religion, especially those that do not recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah, are substituted by the Christian religion. The Jewish religion, like other non-Christian religions, are hereby seen as “*praeparatio evangelii*”, an in some sense legitimate preparation for the realization of the Christian religion that completes the Mosaic and other religions.

As for Islam, it is seemingly scrutinized from the same underlying exclusivist-like assumptions, although Islam is also seen in a certain sense as a kind of a preparation for Christianity. But since Islam is usually only dealt with in the relevant textbooks on church history, where the starting point is the description of the external relations of Christianity and the Catholic Church with the world, the tone compared to the treatment of Judaism is usually somewhat less positive from certain points of view (see, e.g., Albers, 1908, pp. 236–238; De Jong, 1932, pp. 231, 253ff.). First of all, Islam as a religion and culture is often only dealt with from the perspective of Christian and Western European history of civilization (see also, e.g., Rohrbacher, 1872, pp. 340–344), with Islam coming into play when it came to threaten Christian civilization and culture from the Middle Ages onward through powerful armies whipped up by the doctrine of jihad, during the Crusades in response to this aggression, and then in the New Age during the successive sieges of Vienna (1529 and 1683). Due to the many military confrontations with Christianity, the treatment of Islam in textbooks focuses on some violent aspects in Islamic doctrine and on some points of difference with Christianity, without, however, concealing admiration for certain cultural merits of Islam and emphasizing certain similarities with the Christian religion, such as belief in the one God, recognition of the virgin birth of Jesus and the veneration of Jesus as a prophet in Islam. Then Islam, usually also as a dangerous competitor to Christianity, receives some attention during the history of missions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This includes much attention to the many missionaries killed in Islamic countries. What is of interest for our study, however, is that in these descriptions there are few, if any, further explicit statements to be found about the underlying interreligious theology that may or may not have helped underpin this image formation. These are found only in the textbooks on apologetics.

## 5. Theological models in apologetic textbooks

If one takes a closer look at the textbooks on apologetics, it becomes quickly apparent that the underlying paradigm in the treatment of non-Christian religions is not exclusivist but inclusivist. In various terms, it is made clear that Christianity with Jesus Christ as its norm and mediator unquestionably possesses the ‘fullness’ of truth and salvation, but that there is also truth and salvation present to some extent in other religions and that one does not always have to belong to the visible community of Christ’s followers (called church) but that there are avenues to salvation outside of it. However, the latter are rather considered ‘extraordinary’ paths of salvation, while visibly belonging to the church of Christ is considered the ‘ordinary’ path of salvation. This also shows that the inclusivism adhered to by the textbook authors is not even a ‘hard’ but rather a ‘soft’ inclusivism, in which, in addition to the content of the faith, the internal condition of the believer, even if he or she does not explicitly belong to the visible church of Christ, certainly does matter.

This interreligious model is substantiated implicitly and explicitly in the textbooks through various perspectives. It is based on what is later also described in magisterial documents on interreligious dialogue in the wake of Vatican II, such as *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), as a “mystery of unity” (No. 29) of every human being. This is further substantiated in the textbooks through a fivefold universalism. First, in the initial definition of religion: This is virtually unanimously defined as a general human and universal phenomenon that always has its origin somewhere in God. The terms general human and universal imply that any human being in possession of normal intellectual faculties can recognize that there is a substance that transcends time and space and at the same time founds and orients his existence. This transcendent aspect is concretized indiscriminately in textbooks as God. Based on these premises, religion is then briefly described as ‘the bond that unites man with God’. Second universalism: God, who is a good father, wants all people, in past, present and future, to be saved. Third is the fundamental equality and equivalence of all human beings as creatures of God, all endowed with the same ultimate desire for truth and happiness. Fourth, according to the authors, apparently all human beings without distinction are in need of the divine revelation which, like a source of energy for man, opens the way to eternal salvation. And finally, in the wake of this, the last universalistic element emphasizes that God makes Himself known to all people without distinction from creation to the completion of the world and provides the necessary means of salvation to be saved (see, e.g., Berquin, 1942, pp. 97–112, 126–129; Frutsaert, 1931, pp. 29–30; Minnaers, 1924, pp. 23–27; Van Brabant & Stock, 1942, pp. 14–19).

What is also interesting from a historical-pedagogical perspective is the observation that in all of this, the textbooks draw inspiration from the so-called neo-Thomism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is not to say that textbook authors always and everywhere blindly adopt Saint Thomas Aquinas (see, e.g., Van Wiele, 2011, pp. 216–239). On the contrary, the neo-Thomistic approach consists precisely in usually merely transferring what one considers to be Thomas’ useful principles to then current discussions and then linking and adducing them with new data from theology and comparative religious science of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although some textbooks do not explicitly or fully appeal to scholastic vocabulary, their passages on the theology of other religions nevertheless reflect in principle the same universal model of religion of Thomas. Some textbook authors demonstrate this indebtedness most clearly when they

indiscriminately describe religion in this like Thomas (see, e.g., *Summa Theologiae*, I, q 2, art. 3) as follows: man depends on God (Causa Prima), as an effect depends on its cause and religion is nothing but the expression of this connection (see, e.g., Rutten, 1897, pp. 12–19; Valvekens, 1909, pp. 10–25, 68–69; Van Brabant & Stock, 1942, pp. 14–19; Verhelst, 1915, p. 72).

Be that as it may, the question now is how this multiple universalist approach to Christian and other religions can be reconciled with some harsh, possibly intolerant and exclusivist statements such as “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” mentioned in the previous paragraph? According to the authors, the answer to this question is simple, although they admit that in the past this adage has often been misunderstood which has given rise to misunderstandings. For a correct understanding, they say, one must distinguish between the “body” and the “soul” of the Church (see, e.g., Rutten, 1897, pp. 212–213, 252–253; Valvekens, 1909, pp. 251–253). The “body” is the outward, visible community of believers who profess the same faith and participate in the same sacraments. The “soul” is the sanctifying grace or spirit that animates, impels and gives life to the members of the Church. The soul includes not only the visible members of the Church, but also all people of good will who, without perhaps ever having put this into words or without even being aware of it, desire to place their will on the same line as God’s will – something manifested, among other things, in concrete acts of mercy and in following natural morality –, and who, through no fault of their own out of ignorance, do not know the Church or cannot yet be part of it. These people have a so-called “implicit desire” to be part of the Church, and for them, too, salvation in this world and in the hereafter, in a way that only God knows, is fully guaranteed.

With help of concrete examples, the authors further clarify that there is indeed salvation outside the Church. Alfred Le Grand writes:

“The heretic who has openly broken with the Church and who, by departing from it, no longer belongs to his body, may nevertheless belong to his soul, if he is of good will and he errs through an insurmountable ignorance, and who, on the other hand, faithfully fulfills what he thinks is his duty [...] sanctifying grace nevertheless assures this heretic eternal salvation” (1929, p. 334).

And Walter Devivier expresses himself in similar terms:

“The Jews, the Muslims and the pagans. See here what in brief is the doctrine of the Church: only they are excluded because of unbelief in whom unbelief is voluntary; as for those in whom unbelief is insurmountable; if they are lost it is not because they have denied what they could not possibly have known, but because of other grave formal offenses” (1914, p. 416).

## 6. Conclusion

The textbooks on apologetics for adults are an indispensable source for the history of ideas in education to trace the underlying theological model in the treatment of other religions in the period under study. Based solely on the sometimes misleading and brief statements made on the subject in the other constituent textbooks for adult audiences, such as the church- and religion-related histories, one tends to conclude that the theological paradigm was exclusivist. However, when linked to the more philosophical and systematic apologetics textbooks, it quickly becomes clear that the premises of the interreligious paradigm



were not merely ‘hard’ but ‘soft’ inclusivist. One can therefore easily state that these textbooks of apologetics at the level of general principles were precursors of a more refined and further elaborated ‘soft’ inclusivist theology within the Catholic Church around and after Vatican II (1962–1965), with more emphasis than before on similarities rather than differences with the other religions (see, e.g., Van Wiele, 2016, pp. 209–212). This is not only noticeable in Vatican II documents such as *Nostra Aetate* (1965) and *Lumen Gentium* (1964). For example, No. 16 of the latter document states that God provides the necessary means of salvation to all those who lead righteous lives and who, without guilt, do not yet know or cannot acknowledge God. The same principles can also later be found further substantiated by many Catholic theologians. As, for example, with Karl Rahner, who from the same principles even regards non-Christians as “anonyme[n] Christen” (anonymous Christians; see, e.g., 1965, pp. 545–554).

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