

Author Meets Critics (Geoffrey LEGRAND) : Lieven BOEVE. *The Catholic Dialogue School. From Theory to Practice and Back*, London / New York, Bloomsbury, 2025

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Boeve for inviting me to this meeting. Above all, I wish to emphasise just how much his theological work has inspired my own research, whether it be my doctoral thesis on school pastoral care, my habilitation thesis on religious education through symbols, or the many other articles I have written after reading his publications.

The book *The Catholic Dialogue School: From Theory to Practice and Back* summarises the inspiring work that Professor Boeve has carried out on Catholic education for more than 25 years now. His reflections have attracted interest not only in Flanders and in the English-speaking world, but also, increasingly, in the French-speaking world.

After highlighting some of the key features that make this book a major work, from a French-speaking Belgian perspective, I shall propose three alternative avenues: (1) practice as an epistemological value; (2) the paradigm of conversation and encounter as a complement to dialogue; and (3) the importance of public theology in building bridges between theological discourse and society.

In my context, more and more people are currently reflecting on what constitutes the identity of these educational institutions. Despite their geographical proximity, the situation in French-speaking Belgium differs from that in Dutch-speaking Belgium: in the French-speaking part of the country, only 50% of schools are currently Catholic¹, compared with more than 65% in Flanders². Moreover, the process of secularisation is more advanced. That said, alongside secularisation, the categories of detraditionalisation, pluralisation, and individualisation are also relevant for describing the current societal transformations upheavals within French-speaking Belgian Catholic schools. For many years, and in a sense still today, this sector has remained rooted in a discourse centred on so-called human and Christian values, which has led to a significant dilution of its Catholic identity³. This remains evident in places when reading the fourth version of *Mission de l'école chrétienne* (MEC), the educational project for Catholic education. This project is based on the principle of educating pupils in all aspects of their development: cognitive and practical development, relationships with others, aesthetic sensitivity, bodily fulfilment, spirituality and the Christian faith⁴.

As a theologian, although I understand MEC as an educational project grounded in Christian anthropology, promoting an 'integral education'⁵, I regret that the theological dimension is not more fully elaborated in this document. It seems to me that the contributions

¹ Geoffrey LEGRAND, *Les enjeux théologiques de la pastorale scolaire. Recherche sur les finalités de la pastorale scolaire à partir d'une relecture de Paul Tillich* (Tillich Research, 25), Berlin/Boston, de Gruyter, 2022, p. 2. Around 40% of primary schools are Catholic and 60 % of secondary schools are Catholic.

² Lieven BOEVE, *The Catholic Dialogue School. From Theory to Practice and Back*, London / New York, Bloomsbury, 2025, p. 11. Around 60% of primary schools are Catholic and 70% of secondary schools are Catholic.

³ For a detailed critique, see Geoffrey LEGRAND, *Les enjeux théologiques de la pastorale scolaire*, p. 274-279.

⁴ SeGEC, *Mission de l'école chrétienne. Projet éducatif de l'enseignement catholique pour l'enseignement obligatoire*, 4^e ed., 2021, p. 7-9.

⁵ Strangely, the text MEC does not make any reference to this notion of integral education.

of the category of interruption (both contextual and theological) and the method of recontextualization, as developed in Lieven Boeve's book, would serve as a relevant complement to the anthropological foundation contained in MEC. The dialogical concept of revelation, as expressed in *Dei Verbum*⁶, and as employed in the project of the Catholic dialogue school, would offer a response that is 'contextually possible and theologically legitimate'⁷ in the context of pluralisation that we also encounter in French-speaking Belgium. Through conversation, the practice of dialogue, and a culture of encounter, I believe it is indeed possible to achieve the two aims of religious education in a plural context: namely, on the one hand, the capacity to foster reflective religious identities among pupils and, on the other, the ability to engage constructively with convictional pluralism⁸. However, in the project of the Catholic dialogue school, the dialogical dimension also facilitates the recontextualisation of the institution's identity, by enabling all members of the school community to become actively involved precisely through this dialogical approach. By contrast, in the French-speaking context, the MEC educational project remains, ultimately, little known among practitioners and does not generate genuine commitment on their part to 'recontextualise' the Christian tradition.

In light of all these considerations, one of the questions currently arising in the field is the following: 'To what extent can these theological concepts (dialogue, interruption, recontextualisation, etc.) be integrated into an educational project grounded in the integral development of the human person in all its dimensions?' Both the French-speaking Belgian documents, the contributions of French theologians⁹, and the most recent texts of the Congregation for Catholic Education¹⁰ emphasise this integral education and this Christian anthropology. So, might it not be possible to articulate this more anthropological approach more closely with the theological conceptual framework of the Catholic dialogue school?

After this introduction, I would like to address three more general points: the relationship between practice and theory, the contribution of the categories of conversation and encounter, and the potential relevance of public theology for our discussions.

Let us begin with the contribution of practice. The book is entitled *The Catholic Dialogue School. From Theory to Practice and Back*, yet I found myself wondering how practical theology is related to systematic theology. Put differently, what does this "and back" mean? Does it imply (re)starting from practice and moving towards theory? What, then, is the

⁶ Lieven BOEVE, *The Catholic Dialogue School*, p. 63: "As a conciliar document, *Dei Verbum* is revelation about revelation. [...] Revelation stands for the dialogue God seeks with God's people in worlds and history. Moreover, it is through dialogue [...] that this dialogical version of revelation emerged and became normative. Dialogue determines both how the church understands and express truth, and how it arrives at that truth".

⁷ Lieven BOEVE, *The Catholic Dialogue School*, p. 43: "The Catholic dialogue school project offers a response [...] both contextually plausible and theologically legitimate from a Christian perspective".

⁸ Geoffrey LEGRAND, *L'éducation religieuse par les symboles. Une chance pour le dialogue interconvictionnel et interreligieux ?* (Théologie pratique en dialogue, 67), Basel, Schwabe Verlag, 2024, p. 37.

⁹ See François MOOG, *Éducation intégrale. Les ressources éducatives du christianisme*, Paris, Salvator, 2020.

¹⁰ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, "The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue" (25 January 2022). Online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20220125_istruzione-identita-scuola-cattolica_en.html (accessed June 23, 2026).

precise epistemological status of practice? Chapter 6 is entitled “Empirical Verification”¹¹, while the opening lines of Chapter 7 aim to illustrate and deepen the “concrete implementation” of the Catholic dialogue school project¹². Would the role of practice then be limited to legitimising or verifying theory, or might it also be possible to think from practice towards theory? For instance, if practices were given priority, might they not offer a different perspective on what “educate for dialogue” means in Catholic schools today? Here I draw on the writings of Clare Watkins, who seeks more integrative approaches between theory and practice. She presents practical theology as a transformative activity aimed at action, transformation or the improvement of an existing practice to becoming more like the Christ or the Gospel¹³. How, then, can we transform practices to enhance the identity of the Catholic school? How might we conceive the relationship between practical and systematic theology in Catholic education, in such a way that practices are not reduced to a mere “application of theory”, an “empirical verification”, or a “implementation”? In any case, according to the theologians of the Santiago Group, practical theology cannot be regarded as an application of fundamental theology; rather, it should be understood as a “fundamental theology of practices” or as a “theology of action”¹⁴.

The second point concerns the place of dialogue, and its variants, namely discussion and encounter. In this book, Boeve very often highlights the importance of dialogue. I certainly share this interest in the dialogical approach, rooted in *Dei Verbum* (DV 2), which seems to me highly productive and particularly pertinent, both from a contextual and a theological perspective. God reveals himself through dialogue and continues to reveal himself even today in the world and in our history¹⁵. However, I wonder whether it might not be appropriate to complement this more formal paradigm of dialogue with the paradigms of conversation and encounter. Indeed, the style of conversation¹⁶, which is less codified, is developed in particular in Paul VI’s encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* and is linked there to the “dialogue of salvation”¹⁷ (ES,

¹¹ Lieven BOEVE, *The Catholic Dialogue School*, p. 105: Chapter 6. “Empirical verification: support base and pathways for the future”.

¹² Lieven BOEVE, *The Catholic Dialogue School*, p. 131 : “In this chapter [chapter 7], I aim to illustrate and elaborate on the translation of the project of the Catholic dialogue school into practice.”

¹³ Clare WATKINS, “The development of practical theology in Britain”, dans Marcela MAZZINI et François MOOG (éd.), « Groupe de Santiago – Recherches en théologie des pratiques pastorales I » (March 2016), Louvain-la-Neuve-Québec-Paris, Cahiers Internationaux de Théologie Pratique, série « Actes » n° 8. Online: www.pastoralis.org (accessed June 23), p. 35-52, see in particular, p. 37-39.

¹⁴ The Santiago Group project, which brings together some twenty American and European theologians, is « le dépassement d’une théologie pastorale conçue comme science de l’application ou d’une théologie pratique pensée comme une praxéologie vers une théologie fondamentale des pratiques ecclésiales, ou théologie des pratiques pastorales. La théologie que le Groupe de Santiago s’est donné pour mission de penser est une théologie de l’agir de l’Église » (Marcela MAZZINI et François MOOG (éd.), « Groupe de Santiago – Recherches en théologie des pratiques pastorales I », identification form). Professor Olvani Sanchez Hernandez is also a member of the Santiago Group; I would like to thank him for the discussion we had concerning the work under consideration today.

¹⁵ This reflection is stimulating with regard to the stance that Christians may adopt in their search for truth.

¹⁶ On conversation, see also the work of Olvani Sanchez. Olvani SANCHEZ, « La correlación como conversación », in SOCIEDAD ARGENTINA DE TEOLOGÍA, “*Ahí tienen al hombre*” (Jn 19, 5) ¿ *Hacia nueva/s identidad/es de lo humano?* », Buenos Aires, Agape Libros, 2024, p. 19-34 ; Olvani SANCHEZ et Anderson Fabián SANTOS MEZA, « La conversación como método en teología. Presupuestos », in Marcela Mazzini et Fernando Soler (éd.), *Teología de la conversación en el Espíritu. Una exploración interdisciplinar*, Buenos Aires, Agape Libros, 2024, p. 27-55.

¹⁷ Concerning the expression “dialogue of salvation”, see Christian SALENSON, « Le dialogue du salut », in *Chemins de Dialogue*, 52 (2018), p. 13-35. See also Christian SALENSON, *Au cœur des autres. Petite théologie du dialogue*, Paris, Nouvelle Cité, 2025, p. 33 : according to this priest of the Diocese of Nîmes, the expression

74-79). Earlier in this encyclical, Pope Paul VI sets out the transcendent origin of dialogue and situates it within the history of salvation¹⁸. The text further specifies that “in Christ’s ‘conversation’ with men, God reveals something of Himself” (ES, 70). Later, in paragraph 75, after outlining the characteristics of the “dialogue of salvation” (ES 74-79), the text explains that “the [mission] (with the dialogue of salvation) will use the legitimate means of human friendliness, interior persuasion, and *ordinary conversation*”. Therefore, in light of this text, but also on the basis of our experience in schools – where we know that sometimes more is said in informal, friendly, and fraternal conversations – might it not be appropriate, beyond formal dialogue, to emphasise the importance of creating more informal spaces for conversation on spiritual, religious, and Christian matters, in order to build together a stronger, more united, and more resilient educational community? This reflection resonates with that of Archbishop Aveline, who, in the theology of religions, emphasised the importance of the experience of encounter – real and authentic – alongside more official initiatives of interreligious dialogue¹⁹. Moreover, according to Bishop Aveline, “The aim of true ‘dialogue’ is rarely achieved. It would be better, in order not to be too far removed from what is actually lived in practice, to speak of ‘encounters’ or ‘relations’”²⁰. Thus, alongside the more ‘closed’ formal dialogue, it seems to me that, for anyone seeking the truth, it is also necessary to emphasise the importance of a culture of encounter and of the paradigm of conversation.

Finally, my last comment concerns the specific contribution of theology to society. In this book, Lieven Boeve demonstrates how the project of the Catholic dialogue school fosters learning to live together from within diversity. He also explains how theology can contribute to the construction of an open, meaningful, and sustainable society, by positioning itself not at the margins but at the crossroads²¹, taking human concerns into account. In short, learning dialogue in Catholic schools contributes to building the society of tomorrow. Having recently engaged with public theology – with its limitations (the need to ‘translate’ theological language, the risk of loss in translation, etc.), but also with its strengths (aiming at the transformation of society, valuing alterity, enabling theology to recover a certain social credibility, and fostering a more

“dialogue of salvation” recurs like a leitmotif [in *Ecclesiam suam*], « comme pour faire entendre la portée théologique du dialogue, et pas uniquement sa dimension anthropologique ».

¹⁸ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam*, 70 : “the whole history of man’s salvation is on long, varied dialogue, which marvelously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways”.

¹⁹ It should be noted that Archbishop Aveline also recognises dialogue as a locus of revelation : « Le dialogue, occasion de l’épreuve, appel à la conversion, est le lieu de la révélation : on découvre Dieu dans la rencontre qu’il suscite » (Jean-Marc AVELINE, « Penser la foi au cœur de la rencontre », dans *Chemins de Dialogue*, 4 (1994), p. 183-206, ici p. 206). Moreover, in one of his more recent works, Archbishop Aveline also extends his reflection to missiology : « Un Dieu qui vient à la rencontre, demande l’hospitalité, engage la conversation. Le dialogue, moyen de révélation, devient chemin de la mission. [...] Dans les rencontres qu’il suscite, Dieu se révèle toujours plus grand que ce que chacun croyait savoir à son sujet. Il donne ainsi à vivre une expérience qui est authentiquement spirituelle parce qu’elle est expérience de conversion. [...] Il revient aux chrétiens, par le témoignage de leur vie, d’annoncer la grâce du salut qui surgit de la mort et de la résurrection du Christ Jésus, un salut offert à tous, qu’ils ont à communiquer à chacun » (see Jean-Marc AVELINE, *Dieu a tant aimé le monde. Petite théologie de la mission*, Paris, Cerf, 2023, p. 148-156).

²⁰ Jean-Marc AVELINE, « Les spécificités d’une éthique politique en contexte interreligieux », in *Chemins de Dialogue*, 29 (2007), p. 63-76, here p. 71 : « L’objectif d’un vrai ‘dialogue’ n’est que rarement atteint. Mieux vaudrait parler, pour ne pas être trop en décalage par rapport à ce qui se vit réellement, de ‘rencontres’ ou de ‘relations’ ».

²¹ Lieven BOEVE, *The Catholic Dialogue School*, p. 7-8.

dialogical theology)²² – I wonder to what extent this public theology might not constitute a valuable resource for the Catholic dialogue school. I would define this public theology as a theology capable of taking its place in the public sphere, following the example of Saint Paul engaging in open debate with philosophers in the public square (Ac 17, 16-34)²³. Indeed, according to its principles, public theology does not seek to speak *to* society; rather, it aims to foster a genuine *societal conversation* grounded in human situations, without necessarily presupposing consensus²⁴. Moreover, by considering the thought of others, it requires the co-construction, together with others, of theological thought with a view to the common good. However, in Catholic schools, the number of practising Catholic is still on the decline. In order to engage every member of the school community in the Christian educational project, might not the principles of this public theology be in line with the project of the Catholic dialogue school?

These are my main points of reflection after reading this book. Thus, after raising the question of whether it might be possible to articulate more clearly the relationship between an educational project that promotes “integral education” and a more dialogue-based approach, I have formulated a threefold question. Firstly, does the practical section of the book possess a genuine epistemological value *in its own right*? Secondly, might we not consider that the dual paradigm of encounter and conversation could usefully complement the framework of the Catholic dialogue school in more informal contexts? Thirdly, are the principles of public theology not a natural extension of the work already carried out by Lieven Boeve and his team?

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²² Bernard COYAULT, « Pour une théologie publique. Sagesse partagée et échange de dons », in *Istina*, 68 (2023), p. 291-305, here p. 299.

²³ Bernard COYAULT, « Pour une théologie publique », p. 294.

²⁴ Bernard COYAULT, « Pour une théologie publique », p. 293 and ff.

²⁵ This text was translated with the assistance of artificial intelligence and has been carefully revised by the author.