1. INTRODUCTION

Abstract
Catholic schools have a twofold identity. Partly they are educational institutions which, like all schools, have to initiate children and young people systematically and critically into their cultural heritage. At the same time they are Christian institutions rooted in the Christian message and have to contribute to pupils’ religious education. In a multicultural society like the Dutch one this dual identity becomes a dilemma: should other religions (which, after all, are part of the cultural environment) be given a place in Catholic schools and, if so, how? Our question in this article is how Catholic primary school teachers deal with this dilemma. We concentrate, moreover, on a specific aspect of religious education, namely ritual education.

Modern societies are characterized by religious and moral individualization and pluriformity. These processes go along with the process that has been referred to as ‘detraditionalization’. The consequences of these processes for the continuity of Christian and other religious traditions is a primary concern of theology in general and of religious education in particular. How do we impart an effective and meaningful religious formation to children in a society characterized by the above-mentioned processes? This is a problem facing religiously affiliated schools in particular. These schools have a twofold identity: On the one hand they are educational institutions which, like all schools, are expected to initiate children and young people systematically and critically into their cultural heritage. At the same time they are Christian institutions rooted in the Christian message (Anthony, 1999, p. 33) and it is their task to contribute to pupils’ religious education. In a society where Roman Catholics are a minority this dual identity becomes a dilemma: should other religions (which, after all, are part of the cultural environment) be given a place in Christian schools and, if so, how? The question we set out to answer in this article is how Catholic primary school teachers deal with this dilemma. We concentrate, moreover, on one specific aspect of religious education, namely ritual education.

Roman Catholic schools in the Netherlands have always focussed on
the great feasts in the church calendar and on church rituals. In many schools the presence of a growing number of pupils from other religious backgrounds has drawn attention to the major feasts of these religious traditions as well. Thus many schools devote time to, for example, the Hindu Diwali and the Islamic Eid al-Fitr or Sugar Feast, along with Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. This interest in non-Christian rites and celebrations can be seen as part of the task of introducing children to their cultural environment, while the celebration of Christian feasts can be regarded as part of the specific task of Catholic schools, namely to contribute to the pupils’ religious education. We wondered, however, whether teachers actually make this distinction, and that is the question this inquiry aims to answer.

Before proceeding to examine this question, we first need to consider the exact nature of ritual education. In view of the unique nature of (religious) rites, which demands a particular methodological approach in teaching, ritual education is explicitly defined as a specific field of multireligious education (cf. Altena & Hermans, 2001).

In section 2 we consider the nature of religious rites. Section 3 looks at the requirements of ritual educational activities, particularly when conducted in a pluralistic cultural context. Section 4 presents the results of an empirical study conducted among Dutch teachers at Catholic primary schools to determine their views on the aims of ritual education. Finally, Section 5 evaluates the findings of the empirical study in the light of theological ideas about the relationships between different religions.

2. Ritual

What are rites, and religious rites in particular? As Grimes (1990, 259) points out, the study of ritual has produced very little theorising in the sense of a “sustained, collaborative effort to agree on definitions of terms, formulate coherent classifications, conduct research that depends on previous research, and identify the co-variances, causes and consequences of rites”. For this reason we start our discussion with a brief overview of theories in this field (2.1) and then substantiate our preference for Roy Rappaport’s approach. Following from this, we clarify Rappaport’s two central elements of his theory of rites in general (2.2 and 2.3). In section 2.4 we follow Rappaport’s lead in applying general ritual theory to the subject of religious rites.