
IN FAVOR OF A SHIFT, AGAINST ELIMINATION: THE FUTURE OF RE IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN XXI CENTURY BELGIUM

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INTRODUCTION

Despite recent tendencies of secularization and religious pluralism, most Belgian schools are Catholic schools, where Roman Catholicism is a compulsory subject. As I will argue, this can lead to a *de facto* undermining of the freedom of religion and education and in order to maximally guarantee these freedoms for all students, a substantial reform of the Belgian system is required.¹

This paper is divided in four main parts: in a first part, the legal aspects of the Belgian educational system are briefly explicated and in addition, the recent sociological situation concerning religion in Belgium is outlined. Subsequently, I will elaborate on the identity of Belgian Catholic schools today and on the aims and scope of the subject Roman Catholicism. Finally, I will do some recommendations in order to improve the Belgian educational system, and argue why teaching **about** religion should be compulsory in all regular schools, while teaching **into** religion can still be

¹ In this paper, I will only focus on Catholic schools. The reason for this choice is twofold. First, Catholic schools form a substantial majority in Belgium, and particularly in Flanders (the Flemish Community is the largest Community in Belgium) and they are thus a very important part of the Belgian school system. Second, the future of religious education in state schools in Belgium has been discussed in several preceding articles. See for instance Patrick **Loobuyck** and Leni **Franken**, "Toward integrative religious education in Belgium and Flanders. Challenges and opportunities" – *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33/1 (2011), 17-30; Leni **Franken** and Patrick **Loobuyck**, "The Future of Religious Education on the Flemish School Curriculum: A Plea for Integrative Religious Education for All" – *Religious Education*, 108/5 (2013), 482-498; Leni **Franken**, "Religious and Citizenship Education in Belgium/Flanders: Suggestions for the Future" – *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 9/3 (2014), 255-267.

organized in private schools as long as it does not undermine the **de facto** freedom of religion.

RELIGION AND EDUCATION IN BELGIUM

Law and Education in Belgium

For a long time, the Belgian Federal State was responsible for education, but since 1988, education in Belgium is a local responsibility for the Flemish, French and German Communities. However, all policy decisions concerning education must be still in line with art.24 of the Belgian Constitution. According to the first paragraph of this article, “state schools must offer a choice between instruction in one of the recognized religions and in non-confessional ethics”. In the third paragraph, the Constitution adds that “all students have the right to a moral or religious upbringing at the Community’s expense”, which implies that confessional RE in private (mainly Catholic) schools is also funded by the state. Furthermore, the Constitution states that “*education is free*”: parents can choose a school for their children and religious and non-religious communities are free to set up their own schools. If these schools meet an amount of quality criterions and if they are principally accessible for all students, they receive substantial (almost full) state support.²

As a result of the long-standing socio-political dominance of the Catholic Church in Belgium, this particular Church obtained a monopoly position in the Belgian (and particularly the Flemish) educational landscape: today, the subsidized Catholic school network is still the largest provider of education in Belgium and particularly in Flanders, where 62%

² Since 2002, subsidies for working costs (100%) and staff (100%) in Flemish private and public schools are equal, taking into account ‘objective differences’ such as transport cost for pupils and the organization of religious subjects, which is more expensive in public schools. For infrastructure (buildings), schools of the Flemish Government receive a 100% subsidy, while private schools, but also communal, municipal and provincial schools get a 60% subsidy. In the French Community, the same number of subsidies is given for staff (100%) in public and private schools, but different from the Flemish Community, a difference is made between subsidies for infrastructure in Community schools (100%), communal, municipal and provincial schools (60%) and faith-based (mainly Catholic) schools (no direct subsidies for infrastructure). Another difference is that the French Community pays 100% of the working costs for Community schools, while other schools only receive 75%.

of all primary and 75% of all secondary schools are Catholic schools. In the French Community, there are 42.5% primary and 61% secondary private (mainly Catholic) schools.

Belgium in the XXI Century: Secularization, Religious Pluralism and Deconfessionalization

Like many western nations, also Belgium could not escape secularization, which mainly resulted in a decline of Roman Catholicism³: since the 1970's, there is a massive decline of church attendance and Catholic rites de passage and as a result of several scandals of child abuse, many people do not trust in the Catholic Church any longer. Today, only 50% of all Belgian citizens identify with Catholicism and weekly church attendance is very low (5-8%).

Particularly the post '60 generation (born between 1970 and 1984) and the youngest generation (born after 1984) are more and more secularized and the number of people who call themselves atheist or a-religious has increased: from those people who were born before 1940, only 19% identify with atheism or a-religiosity; this number increased to 55% of the post '60 generation and to 69% of the youngest generation.

Furthermore, Belgium is also characterized by an increasing religious plurality. Today, 8% of the Belgian population belong to a non-Catholic religious denomination. With 5-6% of Muslims, Islam is the most important minority religion in Belgium, but also the number of Protestants, Anglicans, orthodox Christians, Jews, Jehovah's witnesses, Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus and Jains increased. Besides, 33% of all Belgians do not identify (any longer) with a particular religion: in these group we can find atheists (9%), but also people who combine several aspects of diverse

³ Statistics in the following paragraphs are based on Karel **Dobbelaere**, Jaak **Billiet**, Liliane **Voyé**, "Religie en kerkbetrokkenheid: naar een sociaal gemarginaliseerde kerk?" – *Nieuwe Tijden Nieuwe Mensen. Belgen over arbeid, gezin, ethiek, religie en politiek*. Eds. Koen Abts, Karel Dobbelaere and Liliane Voyé (Louvain: Lannoo Campus, 2011), 143-172; Jaak **Billiet**, Koen **Abts** and Marc **Swyngedouw**, *De evolutie van de kerkelijke betrokkenheid in Vlaanderen tijdens de voorbije twee decennia en het verlies van vertrouwen in de Kerk in het bijzonder tussen 2009 en 2011* (Leuven: IPSO, 2013); Sarah **Botterman** and Marc **Hooghe**, *Religieuze praktijk in België 2007: een statistische analyse. Rapport ten behoeve van de Belgische Bisschoppenconferentie* (Leuven: KULouvain – Faculty of Social Sciences, 2009).

religious traditions or believe in ‘something’, without identifying with a particular religious tradition.

This diversification, secularization and decrease of church attendance led to a deconfessionalization of many Catholic organizations.⁴ Accordingly, the reason why many parents and teachers choose for Catholic schools has quite often nothing to do any longer with their religious convictions and as a result, also Catholic schools are challenged to reflect about their Catholic identity.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN XXI CENTURY BELGIUM

Catholic Schools and their Identity

For a long time, Catholic schools have been schools from and for Catholics, but today, this is not the case any longer: many students, but also teachers and school principals, do not affiliate with Catholicism. Accordingly, they do not need to be baptized any more (as long as they do not teach Roman Catholicism), but they must – at least formally – agree with the declaration of loyalty of Catholic education and with the school’s Christian identity. In order to avoid further eroding of this identity, without ‘reconfessionalizing’ (Catholic schools are schools from and for Catholics), Catholic schools in Belgium are nowadays officially labeled as ‘Catholic schools of dialogue’: schools wherein students are challenged “to think about their own identity and to dialogue about this identity with co-students”, whatever their religious affiliation may be.

Even though these schools explicitly welcome non-Christian students, it is stated that “the definition of dialogue in the Catholic schools [... is] not a value-free fact” (L. Boeve, General Secretary of the Flemish Catholic School Network)⁵, but is based on the ‘unique’ Catholic and Christian tradition: in particular the idea that human beings are created by God

⁴ Like the Netherlands, Belgium is a ‘pillarized’ society, which means that society is characterized by far-going decentralization of public services and an according denominational / political segregation in the society: Catholics (and sometimes also liberals and socialists) have their own schools, media, trade unions, hospitals and other health-care facilities, youth movements, political parties, etc. Because of the social benefit of these organizations, they are substantially supported by the state.

⁵ Lieven **Boeve**, “Interview met Lieven Boeve”, *Forum*, 45 (Brussels: VSKO, 2014), 5-9.

and that this same God will deliver mankind, is the basis of the Catholic school of dialogue: “Recalling to mind [the awareness of being positioned in a relation of humility toward God] on one hand [...] and introducing the Christian voice in the dialogue on the other, that is the project of the Catholic school of dialogue.” Christianity is thus not only the **source** for dialogue, but also a **unique voice** within this dialogue: “We expect that Christians at school will in one way or the other become responsible, in their diversity, to introduce that Christian voice in the school. Non-Christians are invited to create, from within their own sources and inspiration, a framework in which this can happen.”⁶

In order to make the Catholic school “a society of work and life in which people experience the Christian faith every day in community [...]”⁷, the Catholic school does not only organize lessons in Roman-Catholicism (a compulsory two hours a week subject), but also moments of prayer and sacramental liturgies. In some schools, these pastoral activities are still compulsory, but this is not the case in all schools. Particularly in cities and their agglomerations, where many Muslim students attend Catholic schools, Catholic activities are no longer organized or they are no longer compulsory. With regard to RE however, things are different since the Catholic school network still chooses “to offer, as religious classes, **only classes in Roman-Catholicism**, with attention for diversity and in an open dialogue” (emphasis mine). Given the non-Catholic background of many students in Catholic schools, it is questionable whether this is still desirable.⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ **Vlaams Secretariaat voor Katholiek Onderwijs** [Flemish Secretary of Catholic Education], *Opdrachtverklaring van het katholiek onderwijs in Vlaanderen* [Mission Statement for Catholic Education in Flanders). Available at http://ond.vsko.be/portal/page?_pageid=1510,1136186and_dad=portaland_schema= PORTAL, accessed 19.03.2015.

⁸ In a recent newspaper article (*De Standaard*, January, 20, 2015), Lieven Boeve said that he does not exclude the introduction of Islam courses in Catholic schools in the future. However, if this will ever happen, these schools should, in order to treat all pupils equal, also take into account the convictions of atheists (who form a substantial group in most catholic schools) and of adherents of other faiths. Unfortunately, Boeve did not say anything about these groups and this makes his idea rather controversial.

Roman-Catholicism

Since the new syllabi of 2000, the subject Roman-Catholicism is no longer catechetical but dialogical and as such, it will meet the religious plurality of students. However, if we take a closer look at these syllabi, we observe that Christianity still has a priority position and that other religions are presented from within the own Christian religious tradition. Jesus, his message and the first Christian communities are “the source and point of reference”⁹ and one of the aims of the subject is “to learn from Jesus’ words and deeds in his contact with people and [from] the first Christian societies”¹⁰. Hence, one of the ‘basic options’ for the subject is still “the richness and power of Christian faith”.¹¹

Even though there is attention for interreligious dialogue, this dialogue always starts from the Christian faith and Christianity is always seen as a special and privileged source of inspiration. Philosophical and ethical themes are therefore always approached “more or less from within a confessional point of view”.¹² Besides, the Church (i.e. the Recognized Authority of Roman Catholicism) is still responsible for teacher training, appointment and inspection of the subject and syllabi are still made by this Authority. In view of that, not all parents (and students) who enroll their child(ren) in a Catholic school, approve with this approach.¹³

In Flanders, 82% of all students in primary and secondary schools take Roman Catholic education, mainly in Catholic schools.¹⁴ However, this situation is no longer in accordance with sociological reality and it is thus not a surprise that only 50% of the students of secondary schools in

⁹ Syllabus of Roman Catholicism for Secondary Education, 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22. In the French Community, Catholic religious education has a similar aim: “awakening sense of quest for the meaning of life in existential issues – in confrontation with the many voices and especially the voice of Christianity” – Henri **Derroitte**, Guido **Meyer**, Didier **Pollefeyt** and Bert **Roebben**, “Religious Education at Schools in Belgium” – *Religious Education at Schools in Europe*. Volume 2: Western Europe. Eds. Martin Rothgangel, Robert Jackson and Martin Jäggle (Vienna: Vienna University Press, 2014), 50.

¹² *Ibid.*, 50.

¹³ It is also noteworthy that in some (public and private) primary schools, the preparation for the first Communion is also integrated in the religious education classes, which proves – again – that the subject is not always as open and dialogical as it claims to be.

¹⁴ *Statistic Yearbook of Education 2013–2014*.

Flanders notify that the RE subject taught at school is in line with the religious views at home.¹⁵

Quite often do parents choose for a Catholic school for practical reasons ([perceived] quality of education, school climate, neighborhood, offered studies and image of the school)¹⁶, while the Catholic identity is for many parents, and even more for their children, not important any longer. These tendencies on one hand, and the large number of Catholic schools on the other, make that there are **de jure** sufficient alternatives for those parents who do not want their child(ren) to take Roman-Catholic education, but **de facto** this is not always the case. Even though the state provides transport for students to state schools in order to guarantee the freedom of education, it is not for granted that this is still sufficient today. If there are, for instance, three Catholic schools at a walking or biking distance from a student's residence, while the nearest state school is at a distance of 10 km, it is – despite state support for transport – for many parents more evident to choose for a nearby Catholic school, even if this is not in accordance with their own worldview.

THE FUTURE OF RELIGION AND EDUCATION IN BELGIUM

As stated in the ECHR (art.2, 1st protocol), the right to education implies that “the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions”. Also in the UDHR (art.26) we read that “Parents have

¹⁵ Survey by order of the Flemish Government and as part of equal educational opportunities (Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department of Education 2006). In the first two years of Secondary education (12-14 year), respectively between 50 and 60% of the students say that the religious education classes are in line with the religious views at home. In the next two years (14-16 year), this is the case for about 50% of the students. In the last two years of secondary schooling (16-18 year), this seems to be true for 64% of the pupils in more general studies, while this number is quite lower (46%) for students in technical and vocational training. Unfortunately, only 250 students participated in this survey and in order to get a more representative view, a large-scale survey is needed.

¹⁶ In 1997, the Flemish Government organized a small survey on this issue (Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department of Education 1997), but in order to get a more representative and actual view, a new, large scale survey is required.

a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.” In order to realize this, the state can subsidize schools with a religious identity, but this is not required. However, **if** the state chooses for a policy of support, it should always guarantee sufficient secular alternatives (state schools). As said by Temperman, “the minimum standard international human rights law provides is that all persons, whether secular or religious, must be able to have public school education if they so desire”.¹⁷ As a result of the high number of Catholic schools, a substantial majority of Belgian students attend these schools, but this is often no longer in accordance with their religious affiliation. In order to guarantee the freedom of religion and the freedom of education not only in a **formal** way, but also **in practice**, a change is required.

Unfortunately, a profound reform of the pillarized education system is not on the political agenda yet. Occasionally, some politicians and policy makers plead for a unified system of education¹⁸, but the different school networks and most politicians are strongly opposed to such a system: for several decades, Belgian (educational) policy was characterized by religious conflicts and in order to maintain the peaceful co-existence of the different pillars, it seems to be a better idea to keep the pillars (or what is still left) intact. It is also noteworthy that, during history, the different pillars obtained several privileges which they do not want to lose: as long as Catholic schools camouflage their ‘religious decoloring’ and as long as they frequently stress their ‘affinity with the forefathers’¹⁹, they can still reap the fruits of the schoolpact, which is exactly what happens today.

In addition, several politicians and policy makers (in particular the

¹⁷ Jeroen **Temperman**, “State Neutrality in Public School Education: An Analysis of the Interplay Between the Neutrality Principle, the Right to Adequate Education, Children’s Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief, Parental Liberties, and the Position of Teachers” – *Human Rights Quarterly*, 32 (2010), 872.

¹⁸ During the 1970s, several progressive young Catholics were in favour of ‘pluralist’ schools, but the implementation of these schools was mainly opposed by conservative Catholics. More recently (2002), several liberal politicians agreed with more subsidies for Catholic schools, but only under the condition that they would become pluralistic, which would imply, for instance, that they should organize different RE subjects. This proposal has led to some commotion and particularly Community schools and Catholic schools were strongly against it. In 2014, there was also a plea for one pluralistic school network because the pillarized model would be much too expensive. Once again, a profound political discussion was absent and the existing education networks strongly defended their own privileges within the current system.

¹⁹ Luc **Huysse**, *De verzuiling voorbij [Beyond Pillarization]* (Leuven: Kritak, 1987), 62.

stakeholders of the catholic school network) defend the current system and argue that profound changes will lead to an infringement of the freedom of education. At this point, however, they overlook the fact that freedom of education does not only imply freedom (for organizations) **to establish** schools, but also freedom (for parents) **to choose** a particular school. And it is particularly this last freedom that is not always guaranteed today. Accordingly, a profound reform of the system is required.

One possibility is an adaptation of the number of faith-based schools in accordance with the number of parents/students asking for these kinds of schools. If it becomes clear that less than 75% of Flemish parents/students are in favor of Catholic secondary schools, there is in fact no reason for the state to subsidize such a high number of secondary Catholic schools – and the same is true for primary schools. In this case, the state could use a part of these subsidies for schools with another religious signature – for instance Islamic, Jewish or protestant schools: when the state chooses to outsource a part of its educational services to private (religious) organizations (which is the case in Belgium), these organizations should be treated equally and this means that diverse religious and non-religious schools should have equal opportunities to get subsidies when they offer quality education in an efficient way. As said by Greenawalt: “all who provide the service equally well should be treated the same”.²⁰

It is, however, important that such a plural educational system does not lead to (religious) segregation. Also important is that all pupils, whatever their religious affiliation may be, are educated into critical, autonomous citizens.²¹ Additionally, the state should guarantee an adequate number of neutral or secular state schools for parents and students who do not identify with a particular worldview or who (consciously) choose for education that is not based on a particular worldview.²² In order to realize

²⁰ Kent **Greenawalt**, *Religion and the Constitution*. Volume 2: Establishment and Fairness (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 354.

²¹ See e.g. Johan **De Jong** and Ger **Snik**, “Why should States fund Denominational Schools?” – *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 36/4 (2002), 573-587.

²² Some readers might object that even state schools are not strictly neutral or impartial, but that they are also based on a specific pedagogical and didactical approach. This is indeed the case, but different from faith-based schools, no single religion or worldview has a priority position in state schools, and all religions (and non-religious convictions) are treated with equal respect. Accordingly, this approach could be accepted by all reasonable and rational citizens, and for this reason state schools, in contrast to most private schools, can be labelled as neutral or impartial.

this, the Belgian government should give more subsidies to state schools since these schools are currently underrepresented.

For practical reasons, however, it is not recommended to implement such a policy as soon as possible since that can work counterproductive. Because the Catholic school network has a lot of expertise and experience in education, and because Catholic schools are at least **principally** open for all students²³, the Belgian state can, for pragmatic reasons, choose to continue its policy of support, but only under the condition that **substantially supported faith-based schools** are not only **de jure**, but also **de facto** accessible for students with different religious convictions. Probably many parents and students do not have a problem with the Christian inspiration of Catholic schools in Belgium, but it is not for granted that they agree with the compulsory Roman Catholic education classes (and with other Catholic or Christian activities if they are compulsory). In order to guarantee the freedom of education and the freedom of religion both **in theory and in practice**, the Flemish, French and German Communities could therefore choose for a policy in which substantially subsidized Catholic schools make their religious activities and RE classes optional. Under these conditions, students with a different worldview can be enrolled in faith-based schools, without being obliged to participate in religious activities and classes they do not endorse.

If several Catholic schools still prefer a more explicit religious identity and if they will, accordingly, make their RE classes and other religious activities compulsory for all students, the state can, in order to guarantee the freedom of education (the freedom to choose a particular school), decide to diminish subsidies here and to use them for schools with a more open policy. As said by Harry Brighthouse, “religious schools [...] have the choice to opt out. They are simply being presented with a new option: more financial security in return for fulfilling a secular function, or refusing that security and refusing the secular function”.²⁴ Since faith-based schools are still free to choose how to fill in their pedagogical project, their religious freedom (the freedom to establish schools) will still be guaranteed.

²³ *Flemish Decree on equal educational opportunities I*, 28.06.2002 (B.S. 14.09.2002), chapter 3: right to register, art. III.1.

²⁴ Harry Brighthouse, “School Vouchers, Separation of Church and State, and Personal Autonomy” – *Moral and Political Education*. Eds. Stephen Macedo and Yael Tamir (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 251.

IN FAVOR OF A SHIFT, AGAINST ELIMINATION

For a long time, the main aim of RE in Europe was to respond to parents' wishes to educate their children in their own denominational (Christian) tradition and this view on RE is still apparent in Belgium, where RE is mainly Catholic. However, given the recent religious evolutions in society, I am very sceptical about the future of this kind of RE.

On November 13th, 2015, the world was shocked by the cruel IS attacks in Paris. Quite soon, it appeared that these attacks were connected to a network of terrorists in Belgium and that some of the terrorists were born and domiciled in Belgium. Unfortunately, this is not a big surprise: in Belgium, young people are, as regards RE, dependent on the recognized religions and on their RE teachers, who can teach religion in a state-independent way. Particularly for young, uprooted and easily influenced adolescents, this can be problematic. In Belgium, about 50% of all students with a Muslim background take Islam in state schools. Like the other religious subjects, this subject is not controlled by the state, but by the religious community. Accordingly, the content of Islamic RE is mainly dependent on the goodwill of the teachers and there is no state control.²⁵

The other 50% of Islamic students take Roman Catholicism because they are enrolled in Catholic schools. Even though there is, within this subject, some attention for other religions, including Islam, also there the content is mainly dependent on the teacher's goodwill and interests. As a

²⁵ Since 1975, Islam is organized in public schools, but the first syllabi for the Flemish Community were not published before 2001. These syllabi were very old-fashioned and catechetical and for instance contested issues like *jihad*, *Salafism*, *Wahhabism*, *sharia* and *intifada*, but also the difference between *Shia* and *Sunni* Muslims were not articulated. In addition, there were almost no references to other religions and (non-religious) worldviews, neither did the syllabi refer to western philosophy. From 2013/2014 onwards, there are new syllabi, which are more open and up to date. However, the content is still catechetical, the contested issues mentioned above are still absent, and attention for western philosophy and for other religions is quite small (even though there is now at least *some* attention for these religions, which is without any doubt a step forward). For the 2001 syllabi, see <http://www.embnet.be/Portals/0/leerplan%20Basisonderwijs.pdf> (primary education) and <http://www.embnet.be/Portals/0/leerplan%20secundair%20onderwijs.pdf> (secondary education); for the 2013/2014 syllabi, see <http://www.centrumislamonderwijs.be/images/leerplan%20lo%20in%20ontwerp.pdf> (primary education) and <http://www.centrumislamonderwijs.be/images/leerplan%20so%20in%20ontwerp.pdf> (secondary education), accessed 26.11.2015. Also in the French Community, the development of 'up to date' syllabuses for Islamic education does not go smoothly.

result, it is possible to have 12 years state-funded (but not state-controlled!) RE in Belgium, without being correctly informed about Islam and other religious traditions. In an age where Islam becomes more and more visible in the public sphere, where living together with Muslims is not an option but an **obligation**, and in which radical interpretations of Islam can lead to irrational and horrifying deeds against humanity and democracy, correct and nuanced information²⁶ about this religion is, like correct and nuanced information about other religions and worldviews, an absolute requirement.

I therefore agree with Robert Jackson who argues that “all schools should promote social justice (including religious tolerance), knowledge about religions, the development of the pupils’ skills of criticism and independent thinking, and also the dialogue and interaction between pupils of different backgrounds.”²⁷ In the academic and the educational field as well as in many national and European governmental and policy documents, the aims of RE are, as a result of the changing religious landscape, no longer formulated in a confessional way. It has been stressed that RE should stimulate the intercultural attitudes of pupils, that it should prepare them for participation as future citizens in our secularized, multi-cultural society, and more attention is given now to religious literacy and knowledge about religion(s) as a human phenomenon.²⁸ Within this

²⁶ By this I mean information based on the academic discipline of religious studies, with particular attention for internal and external religious differences, hermeneutics, and critical text-reading.

²⁷ Robert **Jackson**, *Rethinking religious education and plurality: Issues in diversity and pedagogy* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2004), 57, 161-162.

²⁸ See for instance Andrew **Wright**, “Religious literacy and democratic citizenship” – *The fourth R for the third millennium. Education in religion and values for the global future*. Eds. Leslie J. Francis, Jeff Astley and Mandy Robbins (Dublin: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), 201-219; John **Keast** (Ed.), *Religious diversity and intercultural education: A reference book for schools* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2007); **OSCE**, *The Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religion or belief* (Warsaw: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2007); **Council of Europe**, *Draft recommendation on the religious dimension of intercultural education: Principles, objectives and teaching approaches* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2007); Robert **Jackson**, Siebren **Miedema**, Wolfram **Weisse** and Jean-Paul **Willaime** (Eds.), *Religion and education in Europe. Developments, contexts and debates* (Munster: Waxmann, 2007); Robert **Jackson**, “Teaching about religions in the public sphere: European policy initiatives and the interpretive approach” – *Numen*, 55 (2008), 151-182; **GRER** (Groupe de Recherche “Education et Religions”), *Religion et education citoyenne [Religion and citizenship education]* (Brussels: Lumen Vitae, 2011); Siebren **Miedema**, “Maximal citizenship edu-

context, it is an anomaly that the Flemish/Belgian education system is still dependent on the willingness of the religious organizations and their inspection/teachers to implement these important elements of *Allgemeine Bildung*²⁹. The state should take initiatives here and the idea of integrative RE³⁰, combined with ethics, philosophy and citizenship education opens a lot of opportunities. As said by Tim Jensen, religion education is “a must for an open society and a secular state”³¹ and it should therefore be a part of every regular school curriculum in all state run public and publicly funded private schools.³²

Making a religious-studies’ based subject about religion compulsory in all regular schools does, however, not imply that education **into** religion should be excluded everywhere. Since education is free, Catholic schools (like other private schools) should still be able to organize confessional RE if they want to. However, given the facts of secularization and religious diversity, but also of religious extremism, religious intolerance and religious illiteracy, this kind of RE should always be organized **in addition to** non-confessional RE, it should never be compulsory, and parents/students should always have **real** opportunities for exemption.

cation and interreligious education in common schools” – *Religious schooling in liberal democracies: Commitment, character, and citizenship*. Eds. Hanan Alexander and Ayman K. Agbaria (London/New York: Routledge 2012), 96-102; and Robert **Jackson**, *Signposts – Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2014).

²⁹ Tim **Jensen**, “RS based RE in public schools: A must for a secular State” – *Numen*, 55 (2-3) (2008), 123-150; “Why Religion Education, as a Matter of Course, ought to be Part of the public School Curriculum” – *Religious Education in a Plural, Secularised Society. A Paradigm Shift*. Eds. Leni Franken and Patrick Loobuyck (Münster: Waxmann, 2011), 137 ff.

³⁰ Wanda **Alberts**, *Integrative Religious Education in Europe. A Study-of-Religions Approach* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007).

³¹ Tim Jensen, “RS based RE in public schools: A must for a secular State”, 123-150; “Why Religion Education, as a Matter of Course, ought to be Part of the public School Curriculum”, 131.

³² For a defense of a general subject about religion, ethics, philosophy and citizenship in Belgian state and private schools, see e.g. Patrick Loobuyck and Leni Franken, “Toward integrative religious education in Belgium and Flanders. Challenges and opportunities”; Leni Franken and Patrick Loobuyck, “The Future of Religious Education on the Flemish School Curriculum: A Plea for Integrative Religious Education for All” and Leni Franken, “Religious and Citizenship Education in Belgium/Flanders: Suggestions for the Future”.