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Abstract

In Belgium (Flanders), citizenship education is one of the cross-curricular achievements, but it is not scheduled as a separate school subject. Alternatively, citizenship education is integrated in diverse school subjects and particularly in the religious education classes. However, with this didactical approach, two problems arise. First, attention to liberal, democratic values is not always given in a sufficient, convincing way and is often dependent on the teacher staff's efforts and goodwill. Second – and more important –, religious education in Belgium is organized by the independent religious instances of the recognized religions and not by the state. As a result, religious education teachers are often responsible for citizenship education, without supervision of the state. Not surprisingly, the aims of citizenship education are not always reached and Flanders scores below the European average with regard to citizenship education. In order to improve this situation, this article recommends a new, obligatory, non-confessional subject about (and not into) religion, where attention is given to religious diversity, ethics, philosophy and citizenship education. For pragmatic reasons, an immediate introduction of this subject would be impossible, but a gradual and profound change is recommended.

Keywords

religious education, citizenship education, Belgium (Flanders), ICSS (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study)

Introduction

In Belgium (Flanders), citizenship education is not organized as a separate subject, but since 1997, it is officially one of the cross-curricular achievements. In practice, however, this achievement is hardly reached, and the way citizenship education is organized is therefore disputable. In addition, the organization of religious education (RE) in Flanders is not adapted to the religiously diversified society of today and, sometimes, the content of RE is quite opposite to the knowledge, skills and aims that should be achieved within citizenship education. In order to overcome these problems,

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I propose the introduction of a new, obligatory, non-confessional subject about (and not into) religion and citizenship. The introduction of this subject seems the most promising way to cope with recent sociological changes (depillarization, secularization and increasing religious diversity), and with the absence of adequate citizenship education in Flanders today.

RE in Belgium/Flanders

Organization of RE

Belgium has a particular political system, in which regionalism and federalism are combined (Farrell and Van Langenhove, 2005; Hooghe, 1993). Since the state-reform of 1988–1999, Belgium has three Communities (Dutch-, French- and German-speaking Communities) and three Regions (Flanders, Wallonia and the Region of Brussels Capital). The Regions have jurisdiction over ‘space-bounded’ matters, such as regional economy, agriculture, environment, infrastructure and transport, while the Communities are responsible for ‘person-related’ matters, such as health care, social policy, culture, the use of language and education. Consequently, each Community offers education in its own language and has its own Minister and decrees about education.

In addition, Belgium has a peculiar church-state regime that is based on religious freedom and active state support for religions. Today, the Belgian State officially recognizes and subsidizes six religions – the Catholic, Protestant-Evangelical, Anglican, Orthodox, Jewish and Islamic religions – as well as the community of humanist freethinkers. Salaries and pensions are paid for ministers of these worldviews, and they may designate ‘chaplains’ in prison and army. Furthermore, recognized worldviews are entitled to free public radio and television broadcasting time. This system of ‘benevolent neutrality’ which is grounded in the Belgian constitution is also visible in the organization of RE. For this issue, article 24 of the constitution is particularly relevant:

Art. 24 of the Belgian Constitution

§ 1. Education is free;

[...]

The schools organized by the public authorities offer, until the end of compulsory education, the choice between the teaching of one of the recognized religions and non-confessional moral teaching.

[...]

§ 3. All pupils of school age have the right to moral or religious education at the Community’s expense.

Article 24 is the result of the so-called *schoolpact* of 1958, which was a political compromise between liberals and socialists, on the one hand, and Catholics, on the other hand. According to this article, public schools must offer a choice between instruction in one of the recognized religions and in non-confessional ethics during compulsory education. In §3, the Constitution adds that all pupils of school age have the right to a moral or religious upbringing at the Community’s expense, which implies that the Community must pay confessional RE in non-public (confessional) schools as well. All the religious subjects are autonomously organized and controlled by the religious instances, which means that they are responsible for the training, delegation and inspection of RE teachers, and the development of the RE syllabuses.

Furthermore, the Constitution states that education is free. This does not only mean that parents can choose a school for their children, but it also entails that (non-)religious communities are free to set up their own schools with state support if they meet the required criteria about the quality of education. Despite the fact that all religions have the legal opportunity to set up confessional schools, there is only an extended network of Catholic schools in Belgium. Besides, there are a few Jewish, Protestant and non-confessional non-public schools, several non-public schools with a particular pedagogical view (e.g. Freinet and Steiner schools), and almost no Muslim schools. Approximately 70% of all Flemish and 60% of all Walloon schools are non-public, Catholic schools, which is an almost unique situation in Europe. Since 2008, all schools – public and non-public – have been funded by the Flemish Community on an equal basis, except for some objective differences which are more expensive in public schools (transport for pupils and the organization of confessional RE).

In Flanders, the decrees concerning education require that all schools have to offer at least 2 hours of RE in their curriculum. Non-public schools are free to offer one or more recognized religions, non-confessional ethics and/or a subject called ‘cultural views’. Because most private schools are Catholic, they almost all offer Roman Catholicism as a compulsory subject.

The public schools, on the other hand have to offer education in all the recognized worldviews. As a result, pupils in these schools can choose between Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Judaism, Orthodox Christianity, Anglicanism and non-confessional ethics. Except for Anglicanism, the same subjects are organized in the French- and German-speaking Communities.

Current problems with RE in Flanders

Practical problems. Together with some other countries (e.g. Austria), Belgium is one of the few European countries giving the opportunity to diverse minority religions to organize confessional RE in public schools (Potz and Schinkele, 2006: 117–142). However, notwithstanding this policy of active support for RE, many problems arise within this system, which is still the result of the aforementioned historical (and archaic) compromise between Catholics and liberals.

First, there is the artificial distinction between recognized and non-recognized religions and worldviews. The Constitution only requires that education in *recognized* religions and in non-confessional ethics is offered in public schools. Although, for example, Jehovah Witnesses and Buddhists form larger religious minorities than the adherents of the Anglican Church, only the latter worldview is recognized and can organize RE in public schools. Consequently, the system cannot fulfil the constitutional right to religious upbringing for adherents of non-recognized religions and worldviews in an active way. Additionally, some religious groups (e.g. Protestants and Muslims) are very heterogeneous, which makes it very difficult to organize uniform confessional courses in these particular religions. As a result, it is not a rarity that, for example, Protestants refuse to take Protestant RE because they reject the contents of their ‘own’ RE syllabus.

This brings us to another difficulty within the Flemish RE system: the question of exemption. In principle, and along the lines of the *Schoolpact*, non-confessional ethics had to be a neutral subject, but de facto, it has never been neutral, and it has always had an atheistic/humanist content – particularly in Flanders, where the Union of Associations of Humanistic Freethinkers (UVV, *Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen*) has been responsible for the organization of the subject non-confessional ethics since 1993. Due to this non-neutrality, pupils or their parents who do not agree with the content of non-confessional ethics and the recognized religious subjects can get exemption from RE in Flemish public schools. In 2010–2011, 1.6% of the pupils attending secondary public schools (i.e. 0.4% of all the secondary school students in Flanders) were exempted from RE because there was no valid alternative for them (for more statistics, see Franken and Loobuyck, 2013). In the French

and German Community, where non-confessional ethics is still organized by the state and can thus be interpreted as a 'neutral' subject, exemptions are not allowed. In practice, however, the content of this subject is often not neutral, but also atheistic and humanistic. In private schools, exemptions for confessional RE are *de iure* possible, but *de facto*, they are not allowed.

A third problem is the organizational and financial impact of the Belgian system. Public schools are obliged to offer education in the recognized religions and in non-confessional ethics, even when only a very small number of pupils request education in one of these worldviews. Consequently, classes with very few pupils, taking, for example, Orthodox Christianity or Protestantism, are not rarities. Moreover, in urban parts of Belgium, where the school population is religiously diversified, it is almost impossible to fix schedules and to find enough classrooms and teachers for the diverse, parallel classes in RE. These financial and organizational problems will only increase in the future because non-recognized worldviews (e.g. the Buddhist Union and the Syrian Orthodox Church) ask – and probably get – recognition. If they become recognized, they will also have the right to organize their own courses of RE in public schools. Consequently, the system will become even more complex and problematic from the practical and financial point of view.

A final problem is that it is sometimes difficult to find required teachers and inspectors, because not all the recognized religions have an adequate teacher-training programme. The training for Islamic teachers, for instance, is insufficient and this has unacceptable consequences for the quality of Islamic RE. Particularly in the cities, where many students take Islam,¹ school principals complain about this underdeveloped pedagogical and theological training of Islamic teachers, but also about their poor language skills. As a result of the autonomy of the religious instances involved with the religious courses, school principals cannot interfere here. Not surprisingly, some politicians plea for the schooling of Islam teachers conform the values of our democratic, liberal society and in line with the basic scientific and theologian achievements.² However, given the separation of church and state, the freedom of religion and the freedom of association, this is not an easy task.

Sociological problems. More important than the practical problems mentioned above is the change of the religious landscape. First, Belgium became more and more depillarized, whereas the school-pact was a typical compromise of a pillarized society.³ Since the 1960s, many organizations with a previously religious (Catholic) character have evolved to become more or less secular organizations, which are open for people who do not share that particular religious belief (anymore). Catholic hospitals, schools, syndicates, political parties and youth movements still exist, but the 'C' (of Catholic) has become less important – and the same is true for other ideologically based organizations. Catholic, socialist and liberal pillars do not exist as ideologically isolated branches of the Belgian society any longer, although they are still present as 'concerns' (Huysse, 1987). Particularly in education, the Catholic 'concern', representing the majority of schools and pupils in Flanders, is still very powerful. However, due to secularization and increasing religious diversity, the Catholic identity of many catholic schools is evolving. In this context, it is not a surprise that, for example, the head of the Brothers of Charity, André Stockman, pleads for 'authentic' Catholic schools again. This brings us to a second change in the religious landscape: the tendency of secularization in Belgium/Flanders, combined with a massive decline of institutionalized religion. Even though many Belgian citizens still subscribe some Christian values and call themselves Catholic or Christian, more and more people no longer identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church and the number of active church-members has decreased enormously. Nowadays, most 'Catholics' only go to church for important rituals (baptism, religious marriage and funeral) and even those *rites de passage* are often not celebrated in church anymore. At the same time, belief in God has decreased and more and more Belgian citizens call themselves atheists or agnostics (Dobbelaere et al., 2011; Hooghe, 2010).

Finally, post-1960 Belgium is characterized by an increasing religious diversity. Due to the labour migration programmes of the 1960s and 1970s, which attracted many people from Turkey and Morocco, Islam has become the second largest religion in Belgium today. As a result of globalization and immigration, other religions are increasing as well, for example, Jehovah Witnesses, independent Protestants, Buddhists, Hindus, Mormons, Sikhs, Seventh Day Adventists and Hare Krishna adherents. All these sociological changes make that the Belgian/Flemish religious landscape is quite different than a few decades ago and these evolutions have, among others, their repercussions on the organization of RE.

Challenges for RE

The changes in the religious landscape challenge the Belgian/Flemish RE system both in a practical and in a more substantial way. First, the religious background of the pupils can no longer be compared with that of earlier generations. Due to depillarization, secularization and increasing religious diversity, fewer people are actively involved in religion and religion has become less important for daily life. Even though 70% of the Flemish pupils still go to Catholic schools, many of them do not have much affinity with Christianity; a number of them, especially in the cities, are adherents of other religions – mainly Islam – and some of them do not believe at all. However, given the large amount of Catholic schools, it is, in practice, easier for parents to choose for a Catholic school – even though parents/pupils are not Catholic (any longer). For many parents, the ‘choice’ for a Catholic school is not based on religious reasons anymore, but on the location, the number of immigrants and the (perceived) quality of education. In addition, the pupils’ choice of a particular religious subject in the public schools is frequently based on non-religious reasons: because of the teacher, because their friends take this subject or because other students label the subject as ‘easy’.

As a result of these choices, the classroom of Roman Catholic RE (in public and in non-public (Catholic) schools) is increasingly populated with children who do not believe nor practise any religion. This is not surprising if we know that more than 82% of all the pupils in secondary Flemish schools are enrolled in Roman Catholic RE (Vlaamse Gemeenschap (Flemish Community) 2010–2011)⁴ – which is, given the tendencies of secularization and religious pluralism, a very large amount. It is thus not a surprise that there have been some attempts to cope with this new situation.

First, there was the new curriculum of Roman Catholicism. Because the previous curriculum did not fit in the reality of secularism and diversity, it was transformed in 1999. Since then, more attention is given to the reality of religious diversity, (the discourse with) non-Christian traditions and inter-religious learning and dialogue. However, education still has a confessional character, the teachers are appointed by the Catholic community and the other traditions are always seen through and confronted with the ‘own’ Catholic tradition. This kind of ‘deconfessionalization’ has led to a paradox: on the one hand, the religious plurality is taken seriously and pupils get information about non-Christian religions, but on the other hand, this information is always approached from *within* and confronted with the Catholic tradition, which is presented as the ‘vocational and inspiring path’ (Boeve, 2000: 34). It has been acknowledged that the new pedagogical perspective asks for a middle path between a clinical and a confessional approach, but Christianity still has a ‘priority position’ as a point of reference (Roebben, 2000: 60). As a result, we could say that Catholic RE now is neither confessional, nor impartial, but something hybrid. This is an unclear situation and not satisfying neither for the defenders of confessional RE, nor for the defenders of non-confessional RE.

Second, there are, particularly in public schools, some initiatives to stimulate cooperation between teachers and pupils of diverse worldviews and in 2012, the different recognized instances

responsible for RE in Flanders signed a joined declaration about their engagement to stimulate inter-religious competencies and dialogue. All the recognized worldviews agreed that pupils should learn more about the other worldviews and that there should be more inter-religious cooperation between the teachers of the different worldviews. However, the declaration is rather vague about what will/should happen in reality. How much time should the RE teacher spend on education about religion and inter-religious dialogue? What will happen in Catholic schools where there is only one RE teacher – that is, the teacher of Roman Catholicism? Who will control and organize the supervision? Due to this haziness, the religious instances plan initiatives now to make their joint engagement more concrete.

Finally, the Council of the schools of the Flemish Community (which contains the largest part of the public schools in Flanders) presented its own proposal: from September 2014 onwards, attention will be given to knowledge of other worldviews and to inter-religious dialogue in the last 2 years of secondary schooling in public schools of the Flemish Community. However, the practical implementation of this subject (e.g. who should teach it, who should be responsible for teacher-training, syllabuses and inspection, how many courses or teaching hours should be scheduled) and the conformity of this proposal with the constitutional article 24 remain open questions. Besides, the proposal will in fact remain the *status quo* with its aforementioned problems: religious instances will still be responsible for the syllabuses, inspection and teacher training, pupils in public schools will still be divided according to their worldview (even though they will get common ‘inter-religious’ education as well), and exemptions in public schools will remain possible.

Notwithstanding these attempts of change, the *organization* of RE has not changed substantially since 1958. Religious plurality, depillarization and secularization are important challenges for RE (Skeie, 1995, 2002), but in Belgium/Flanders, the status quo with regard to RE remains. If, however, RE is part of the approved school curriculum, it has not only to increase the religious knowledge of the own tradition, but it also has to stimulate dialogue, tolerance and mutual understanding in a context of inter-religious education and diversity (Council of Europe, 2007; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), 2007). If we agree that RE should stimulate the capacities for dialogue, mutual understanding, respect and religious tolerance – something we can hardly neglect in our time –, a system in which pupils have confessional RE in separate classes (public schools) or in which pupils of different religious background have to take ‘semi-confessional’ Roman Catholic RE (non-public/Catholic schools) is not the most appropriate way to cope with these tasks.

Citizenship education in Flanders

Organization of citizenship education

Different from RE, citizenship education in Flanders is not organized as a separate subject, but since 1997, it is officially one of the ‘cross-curricular achievements’. On the basis of these achievements, students should be made conscious of, for example, the environment, human rights, democracy and political participation (Kavadias and Dehertogh, 2010: 13). Schools are obliged to do some efforts in order to realize their cross-curricular achievements, but they are not forced to test or examine them. In other words, schools must prove that they actively work about citizenship education as a cross-curricular achievement, but whether this achievement is reached or not is not relevant for the school’s and pupil’s evaluation (Kavadias and Dehertogh, 2010: 14). When citizenship education is concerned, schools are thus not evaluated with regard to the realized aims, but only with regard to the efforts made to realize them.

In order to integrate citizenship education as a cross-curricular achievement in the school curriculum, there are different possibilities. First, schools can (inspired by their pedagogical project) set up common, cross-curricular projects in which attention is given to citizenship education. Common examples are projects about human rights, the environment or racism. Second, citizenship education can, as a general aim or final achievement, be integrated in other regular and 'neutral' subjects (i.e. compulsory subjects of whom the content is controlled by the state, e.g. history or languages). Finally, citizenship education can be integrated in the religious subjects. However, all these ways of integrating citizenship education cope with different problems.

Current problems with citizenship education in Flanders

According to a survey of Hooghe and Dassonneville (2011), common, cross-curricular projects seem to have positive effects on political knowledge. However, these projects are not always sufficient: some projects are only set up for a small part of the pupils and, hence, not all the pupils participate in an equal manner. Furthermore, it is, given the extensive list of final achievements with regard to citizenship education, not possible to reach these aims by organizing only a few projects in a year. More attention should be given to citizenship education, but many teachers assert that they have not enough time to do this.

This brings us to the second strategy of organizing citizenship education: the integration of citizenship education in 'neutral', regular subjects – an approach that is also insufficient. The main problem here is that many teachers do not have the time to pay attention to citizenship education because they use all their scheduled time for the education of their specific subject material. For teachers of exact sciences, this seems almost evident, but even for the teachers of humanities, it is not possible to pay much attention to citizenship education because this will always be at the expense of other subject matter. With an overloaded compulsory curriculum, there is little chance of the development of citizenship education as a cross-curricular theme.

Finally, the strategy of integrating citizenship education in the RE subjects – a strategy many schools choose in practice – is also problematic for several reasons. First, RE in Flanders (and in the other parts of Belgium) is not organized and controlled by the state, but by the different recognized religious authorities and the non-confessional humanists. Consequently, RE in Belgium/Flanders is, as a subject *into* and not *about* religions or non-confessional ethics, not a 'neutral' subject, and it is questionable whether such a subject is entitled to integrate civic education in its 'non-neutral' or confessional discourse.

In addition, the content of some religious subjects in Flanders is quite opposite to the knowledge, skills and aims that should be achieved within citizenship education. To give an example, one of the aims of citizenship education is that pupils can think in a critical, reflexive way, and in order to realize this, the best objective, scientific knowledge at hand should be taught. However, some teachers in religion tell their pupils that evolution theory is a true theory and that Darwinism is false. In addition, some RE teachers do not support the principles of our liberal democracy such as freedom and (gender) equality. Given the autonomy of the religious instances organizing these religious courses, school principals do not have any power to interfere here. It is therefore questionable whether citizenship education can be integrated adequately in the existing RE subjects. Even though we notice that some religious instances (e.g. Roman Catholics and Protestants) and the humanists do some noteworthy efforts to implement citizenship education in their courses, this integration is still dependent on the goodwill of these instances and it is thus not the state's responsibility.

Finally, there is the problem of exemption from RE in public schools. If citizenship education is integrated in the RE classes, this does only make sense if RE is compulsory for all the pupils.

Within Catholic secondary schools, which form a large majority in Flanders, RE (Roman Catholicism) is indeed a compulsory subject. In public schools, however, pupils are not obliged to participate in any of the religious subjects offered and exemption for RE is possible. This possibility of exemption is important if we take citizenship education seriously: if citizenship education is of general interest, it is not an option to integrate it in a subject that is in fact not compulsory.

Citizenship education in Flanders: International Civic and Citizenship Education Study

Despite the efforts some individual schools and teachers make in order to integrate citizenship education adequately in the school curriculum – be it as an integrated part of existing subjects or in the form of some non-subject related projects – recent research has proven that Flanders scores far below the average with regard to citizenship education. As regards knowledge about citizenship, confidence in political institutions and gender equality, Flemish students are situated around the European and International average (De Groof et al., 2009: 32). However, with regard to most other indicators measured, Flemish students score far below the European and international average: Flemish pupils are, for example, less interested in fundamental democratic rights, they are not prepared to give equal chances and rights to ethnic groups, and they do not expect much active political participation of themselves (De Groof et al., 2009: 33). With regard to their attitude toward immigrants, political interests and participation and feelings of patriotism, the situation of Flemish students is even worse (De Groof et al., 2009: 33–34). In sum, Flanders has a very low score with regard to different indicators of social responsibility and citizenship.

When we take the result of this inquiry into account, we cannot but conclude that the actual organization of citizenship education in Flanders is insufficient and that a new, alternative approach is needed. The introduction of the general school aims in 1997 shows that the Flemish Government takes citizenship education seriously. Moreover, with the introduction and formulation of these aims, the Flemish Government confirms that citizenship education is necessary in order to reach what Tim Jensen (2008, 2011) calls *Allgemeine Bildung*: the self-development toward reflexive individuals and the formation of responsible citizens. However, as the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) proved, Flemish students score very low on citizenship education and, hence, an improvement of the actual system seems necessary. If we also take into consideration the fact that the organization of RE in Flanders is not adequate any longer and that the lack of non-stereotypical, objective religious knowledge of pupils probably leads to intolerant attitudes and difficulties in respecting other beliefs, practices and rituals, a reformation of the actual system of RE seems also necessary.

Religion and citizenship as part of ‘Allgemeine Bildung’

Over the last decades, the idea of RE as an integrative, non-confessional and pluralistic school subject and the relationship between religious and citizenship education has received positive attention in literature (e.g. Alberts, 2007; Jackson, 2003, 2004; Jensen, 2008, 2011; Miedema, 2012; Miedema and Bertram-Troost, 2008). In addition, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the European Commission (REDCo project), the OSCE (2007) and the Council of Europe (2007) support initiatives to stimulate religious dialogue, inter-religious education and the study of religious and secular diversity. These initiatives are seen as essential elements in the struggle against prejudices and in support of more respect and toleration (Jackson, 2008; Schreiner, 2001). In some countries (e.g. Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the

United Kingdom), integrative RE has already become part of the school curriculum: RE is no longer organized as confessional education *into* religion, but as a non-confessional course that teaches pupils *about* religions. At the beginning of the 21st century, this kind of RE that aims at 'learning about different religions' is of public relevance 'because it contributes to citizenship education for the culturally and religiously diverse societies of present Europe' (Meijer, 2011: 210). If RE is organized in an 'objective, critical and pluralistic' manner (cf. ECHR Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen and Pedersen, judgment 7 December 1976, §53, confirmed in Folgerø v. Norway, judgment 29 June 2007, §85) and if teachers are well-educated for this aim, it can develop competences and attitudes that enable individuals to respect the rights of others. In addition, it can develop skills of critical empathy and foster dialogue with others. Pupils will thus not only learn *about*, but also *from* religion. In sum, if we take into account the fact of religious pluralism in our contemporary society and the correlated need for respectful dialogue and correct information about different worldviews, there is a close and almost evident link between religious and citizenship education.

However, there is only a link between religious and citizenship education if RE is organized in a pluralist, integrative and non-confessional way. As Meijer (2011) notes, 'a religious education that contributes to citizenship education for a pluralist democracy itself has to be pluralist' (p. 212). Therefore, I propose the introduction of a separate, integrative, compulsory, non-confessional and pluralist subject about religion and citizenship in all Flemish schools.

Compared to the current organization of RE in Flanders, such a subject has many advantages. First, pupils in public schools will no longer be separated according to their worldviews, but they will get the opportunity to learn from and interact with each other and to ask questions about their own and other worldviews. In addition, the proposed subject seems to be a good option to enlarge the religious knowledge of young people and to stimulate an open attitude of tolerance. Many citizens lack correct and non-stereotypical knowledge of religions, which can lead toward intolerant attitudes and difficulties to respect other beliefs, practices and rituals (cf. low score on ICCS inquiry with regard to attitudes to immigrants and ethnic minorities). Therefore, one of the purposes of the new subject about religion and citizenship is to inform pupils about religious and non-religious worldviews, to reduce the prejudices against (adherents of) other religions (learning *about* religion) and to develop a respectful and tolerant attitude toward cultural and religious differences (learning *from* religion).

In addition, the actual tension between citizenship and RE can be solved: within the new subject, attention to religions will be given, but only in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner. This implies, among others, that this subject should be organized and controlled by the Flemish Government and not by the recognized worldviews. Consequently, the teaching of facts that are opposite to some basic liberal values and/or to the best scientific knowledge at hand will belong to the past. If, within the proposed subject, attention is also given to political knowledge (i.e. cognitive knowledge about, for example, the environment, democracy, the Belgian political institutions and its complex federal system, human rights and solidarity),⁵ the aims of citizenship education will probably be better achieved than in the actual system.

The future of religious and citizenship education in Flanders

The organization of religious and citizenship education in Flanders struggles with many problems, and this is probably one of the reasons why Flemish pupils score low on the ICCS survey. An improvement of the system seems necessary, and hereto, we can distinguish several stages.

In a first stage, schools can start with some *pilot projects* in which education about religion and citizenship education are part of the existing RE subjects. In order to guarantee impartial and

qualitative lessons, RE teachers should be trained to learn essential educational skills and to obtain the required knowledge. At this point, it is important that the state – and not the religious instances – controls this part of the RE lessons and fixes the final achievements of this particular part. This is different from the actual system in which the state is not involved with the content of RE lessons at all. However, in order to guarantee a minimum level of improvement when it comes to citizenship education and impartial knowledge about different religious traditions, state interference is necessary and the religious instances should show more openness for state involvement.

For practical reasons, it would be appropriate to work with modules in this first stage: for example, two modules of (separate) education *into* religion, controlled and organized by the religious instances, and one module of citizenship education and integrative education *about* religion, organized and controlled by the state. Obviously, pupils should not get exemption for the non-confessional module, while exemption for confessional RE in public schools will remain.

In a second stage, 1 hour should be scheduled for compulsory education about religion and citizenship education – taught by new RE teachers or by the actual RE teachers with the required didactical skills – and 1 hour should be scheduled for confessional RE (for which exemption is possible). This system, which has already been proposed by several Belgian politicians, has the advantage that it makes a clear difference between confessional RE on the one hand, and non-confessional RE and citizenship education on the other hand. With the goodwill of the political parties and the religious instances, such a system can be implemented quite soon and without a constitutional amendment: an adaptation of the decrees concerning RE will be sufficient. Moreover, when RE teachers have obtained the required educational skills within the first stage, the implementation of this second stage would in fact be quite easy.

In a third stage, a new compulsory subject of 2 hours a week, in which education about and from religion, *and* citizenship education are integrated, should be introduced. This new subject can be implemented as a *substitute* for the existing RE courses (for this ‘final’ option, which I prefer on the long term, a constitutional amendment is required),⁶ or the subject can be introduced as a new, regular subject, while the existing RE subjects become optional. This means that public schools will still offer education in the recognized religions and in non-confessional ethics, but only *at pupils’/parents’ request*. Given the possibility of exemption, this is in fact already the case in Flanders. Besides – and more important –, all public schools should offer ‘religion and citizenship education’ as a separate, non-confessional and compulsory subject.⁷

For non-public schools, who are not bound to the Constitutional obligation to organize confessional RE, the possibility to organize (optional) state supported confessional RE will remain. In addition, these schools should also organize the new subject about religion and citizenship as a compulsory subject.

Within most of the systems mentioned above, the actual confessional RE subjects will remain – as the main part of RE (first stage), as a subject of 1 hour a week (second stage) or as an optional subject (third stage). Only when the constitution is amended (final stage), RE can become fully separated from the religious institutions. However, given the constitutional obligations and the influence of (religious) stakeholders, this system will not be implemented soon, and for pragmatic reasons, it might be better to improve the actual system gradually. Nonetheless, if we choose for such an improvement, the state should not only be responsible for the non-confessional part of RE, but there should also be more state control into the confessional RE subjects, so that their content is not opposite to the fundamentals of our liberal democracy and to the aims of civic education. Notwithstanding the separation of church and state (which is not an absolute separation in Belgium), the state should have more authority to control the confessional RE classes and to interfere when fundamental didactic/educational aims are not reached or even opposed.

Conclusion

The introduction of a new subject in which citizenship education and education about religion are integrated requires many efforts and willingness from politicians, educational staff, and religious stakeholders. However, given the low score of Flemish pupils with regard to citizenship education and given the actual problems with the organization of religions education, it is necessary to improve the actual system as soon as we can.

When teachers have the required educational skills to teach about religion in an impartial, informal way, the integration of religious and citizenship education in one single, separate subject will be a surplus in our contemporary society, where many social and political conflicts are the result of incorrect knowledge, prejudices, and misunderstanding of the religious convictions and practices of our co-citizens. As Robert Jackson (2004: 57) notes, ‘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’. The introduction of a subject in which education about religion and citizenship education are integrated can be an important ‘tool’ to realize this.

When such a subject is well organized, it is apparent that the concept of citizenship education will have more chances to succeed than in the actual situation in Belgium, where citizenship education is only considered as a cross-curricular achievement that is not really evaluated. If the Belgian/Flemish Government takes seriously the responsibility for citizenship education, it could,

without any preference for a particular worldview or religion, take on the political-pedagogical responsibility to stimulate the policy of and practice in schools of fostering religious edification as part of an integral citizenship and religious education definitively combined in schools as religious citizenship education. (Miedema, 2012: 100)

We cannot but hope that the Belgian/Flemish Government takes these words into consideration and does some effort to reform the organization of religious and citizenship education, so that both subjects can (re)gain their value within a liberal, democratic, education system.

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Notes

1. In the region of Brussels Capital, for instance, 47.5% of the pupils in primary public schools and 44.7% of the pupils in secondary public schools were enrolled in Islam in 2013–2014. Islam has thus become the largest subject in public schools in Brussels, and this percentage will probably increase in the next years.
2. The previous Flemish Minister of Education (Pascal Smet), for example, stimulated a new, inter-university training enabling students with a bachelor’s degree to get a master’s degree in arts/world religions, with a specialization in Islamic theology and religion. This new programme will prepare students for a job as Islam-consultant, but also for a job as Islam teacher. However, the programme is not *required* yet in order to become an Islamic RE teacher (<http://www.pascalsmet.be/articles/onderwijs/ku-leuven-start-2014-met-optie-islamitische-theolo>).
3. ‘Pillarization’ refers to denominational/political segregation in social organizations, media, trade unions and schools. This kind of segregation in social life was typical for the Low Countries. The process of depillarization started in the 1970s but is not yet finished.
4. Given the fact that almost all secondary non-public schools are Catholic and that they represent 74.5% of all Flemish secondary schools, 74.5% of all pupils in non-public schools take Roman Catholicism.

In addition, 30% of the pupils in secondary public schools take Roman Catholicism – a percentage that counts for 7.5% of all the pupils. This brings us to a sum of 82% of all pupils taking Roman Catholicism in secondary Flemish schools. In primary schools, we observe similar tendencies.

5. This can still be done in group projects because this didactical approach seems better to cope with political knowledge than classical lessons about political institutions (cf. Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2011: 335). Nonetheless, more time is needed for these kinds of projects, and this is, for instance, possible if they are scheduled within the new subject proposed here.
6. I cannot go into detail here, but I am convinced that the constitutional requirement to organize confessional RE is not only archaic, but also undemocratic because it is often used as a conversation stopper when the transformation of the actual RE system is at stake. Within a liberal democracy, confessional RE is *permitted by justice*, but it is not *required by justice*. Therefore, the state should not be *obliged* by the constitution to support this kind of RE with collective tax money. Whether public schools should organize confessional RE or not, and whether the state should finance this kind of RE or not should be a matter of democratic deliberation, and should not be fixed in a constitutional or equivalent law.
7. A comparable system is already implemented in Zurich, where *Religionskunde* (education about religion) is a compulsory subject and pupils are free to take *religiöser Unterricht* optionally (Frank and Bochinger, 2008: 210).

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