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Deconfessionalising RE in pillarised education systems: a case study of Belgium and the Netherlands

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1. Introduction

Today, the social phenomena of secularisation, religious diversification and globalisation challenge the organisation of religious education (RE) in many nations. Particularly in Europe, there is an important debate going on about the place of RE in the school curriculum and about its aims and didactics. Should RE be on the core curriculum? And if so, should it be organised in a 'neutral' or impartial way, or is a confessional approach to be preferred? Or is neither of these two approaches satisfying and do we, instead, need inter-religious RE, where authentic dialogue between different religious traditions is stimulated?

In academic literature and in diverse policy-documents (e.g. Council of Europe 2004, 2008; OSCE 2007; Jackson 2014a), these and other issues are frequently discussed. Quite often, the focus is on RE in *state* schools, i.e. schools which are *funded and established by the state*. This focus is not a surprise: in most European nation states, state schools form a majority and the number of private schools is rather low. This, however, is not the case in Belgium, the Netherlands and Ireland, where most schools are private faith-based (Roman Catholic and/or Protestant) schools, which are *funded but not established by the state*. However, as a result of secularisation and increasing religious plurality on the one hand and the high number of faith-based schools on the other, an increasing number of students in these schools no longer identify with the religious conviction of these schools. Therefore, the question of how *faith-based* schools in a pillarised education context could deal with RE needs to be addressed as well. This will be the focus of this article.

For historical and societal reasons, we will focus on faith-based schools in Belgium and the Netherlands. Both nations share, to a large extent, a common history and in spite of some differences, there are several important similarities between their educational systems, which make a comparison worthwhile. In addition, the religious landscape in Belgium and in the Netherlands is also comparable: both nations are traditional 'Christian' nations (with Catholicism as the main religion in Belgium and both Protestantism and Catholicism as the main religions in the Netherlands), which are nowadays characterised by ongoing secularisation. Besides, religious diversity has increased significantly in both nations and particularly the growing presence of several Islamic traditions, which altogether form the major non-Christian religion in both countries, often leads to controversy and discussion – also with regard to education policy.

After a brief historical sketch of the educational systems in Belgium and the Netherlands (2), attention will be given to the present situation and to the challenges of religious diversity and secularisation in faith-based schools (3). In order to show how these challenges are currently met, several recent developments concerning RE in Belgium and the Netherlands are discussed (4). In conclusion (5), we will outline some suggestions for the future of RE in faith-based schools in a pillarised education context.

2. Pillarisation in education: history and legal framework

Since 1830, Belgium and the Netherlands are two separate, independent nations which have, as a result of their shared history, several things in common. One of these commonalities is the phenomenon of *pillarisation*: the 'vertical' division of society in closed social groupings or 'pillars' along class and ideological or religious lines, with each pillar having its own social institutions such as newspapers, broadcasting organisations, political parties, trade unions, health insurances, farmers' associations, banks, schools, hospitals, universities, youth movements and sport clubs.¹ Today, this vertical division of Belgian and Dutch society almost disappeared, but in education, it is still significant: at present, between 60 and 70 per cent of all Belgian and Dutch schools are state-funded, faith-based (Roman Catholic or Protestant) schools. Even though the pillarised education system is now and then criticised in the media, politicians and policy makers do not want to change the system in the near future, mainly for the sake of peace and because abolishing it would undermine the freedom of education. In order to understand and clarify this pillarised educational system, we will start with a brief legal and historical sketch.

2.1 Belgium

Quite soon after Belgian independence (1830), numerous primary schools were established and the influence of the Catholic Church in education was impressive. This, however, was not appreciated by all citizens, and two times (from 1878 to 1884 and from 1950 to 1958) the role of religion in education has led to a 'school struggle' wherein Catholics on the one hand and liberals and socialists on the other strongly opposed each other. After a long period of political unrest and disagreement, a compromise was reached with the *schoolpact* (1958) and the related *schoolpact-law* (1959). Thirty years later (in 1988), there was an institutional reorganisation of the Belgian state and since then, the different Communities (Flemish, French and German) are responsible for education. In addition, some core principles of the *schoolpact-law* were modified and implemented in the first and third paragraph of the then revised Constitution (art. 24):

§ 1. Education is free; [...]. The community offers free choice to parents. The community organises non-denominational education. This implies in particular the respect of the philosophical, ideological or religious beliefs of parents and pupils. Schools run by the public authorities offer, until the end of compulsory education, the choice between the teaching of one of the recognised religions and non-denominational ethics teaching. [...]

§ 3. Everyone has the right to education with the respect of fundamental rights and freedoms. Access to education is free until the end of compulsory education. All pupils of school age have the right to moral or religious education at the community's expense.

In order to guarantee the freedom of education not merely in a formal but also in a substantial way (§1), faith-based schools are largely funded by the state: salaries for staff are the same in state schools and in private (mainly faith-based) schools; subsidies per student are equal; and infrastructure and working costs in private schools are subsidised for 60 per cent or more.² In exchange for subsidies, these schools must be accessible for all students, whatever their religious affiliation may be. At present, more than 60

per cent of the schools in Belgium are state-funded Catholic schools, attended by an equivalent number of students.

Furthermore, the Constitution requires that all state schools offer education in the recognised religions and in non-confessional ethics (§1). Accordingly, students in state schools can choose now between Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodox Christianity, Anglicanism,³ Islam, Judaism, and non-confessional ethics. All these subjects, with the exception of non-confessional ethics in the French and German Communities, are autonomously organised and controlled by the recognised religious or non-confessional communities, which means that they – and not the state – are responsible for the training and appointment of teachers, for inspection and for the syllabuses.⁴

Also in private schools is religious education a regular, subsidised school subject. This is in line with the last sentence of art.24, §3, which states that ‘all pupils of school age have *the right to a moral or religious upbringing at the Community’s expense*’. In the Flemish Community, RE is organised two hours a week in state schools, while it is scheduled at least two hours a week in private schools. In the French Community, RE is scheduled two hours a week in all faith-based schools and in some ‘secular’ private schools.⁵ Because almost all private schools are Catholic, most private schools have Roman Catholic RE on their curriculum. In state schools and in other secular private schools in the French Community, one hour of RE in the recognised worldviews is scheduled, and in addition, students have one common hour of ‘Education to Philosophy and Citizenship’ (EPC).

2.1. The Netherlands

The Dutch educational system is known as the *dual system* and has its roots in the revision of the Dutch constitution in 1848. This revision not only limited the power of the king and introduced parliamentary democracy in the Netherlands, but it also recognised the freedom of education. Establishing schools was no longer considered to be the sole prerogative of the state and religious groups were now granted the right to establish their own schools (Akkermans 1997, 59). Thus, since 1848, there is a dual system of state and private, mainly faith-based, schools in the Netherlands. However, the freedom of education was still curtailed because private schools received no state funding whereas state schools did. This situation led to the so-called school struggle of the nineteenth century, wherein confessional groups strived for equal funding of faith-based schools. After several decades, this matter was settled in 1917 by an historic agreement between Christian political parties and the liberals and socialists, known as the *pacification*. This agreement granted equal funding to both state schools and private, faith-based schools (Vreeburg 1993, 79–83; Westerman 2001) – a situation that lasts until today.

In article 23, §7, of the present Dutch constitution, which deals with the freedom of education, this matter is stated as follows:

Private primary schools that satisfy the conditions laid down by Act of Parliament shall be financed from public funds according to the same standards as public-authority schools. The conditions under which private secondary education and pre-university education shall receive contributions from public funds shall be laid down by Act of Parliament.

Since the Christians, liberals and socialists reached their historic agreement in parliament, the number of private schools has steadily increased. Notwithstanding massive religious disaffiliation among the Dutch population, today there are approximately twice as many faith-based schools in the Netherlands as there are state schools.

Although state and private schools are equally funded by the state, they differ from one another with respect to three basic liberties: freedom of establishment, freedom of religious conviction and freedom of organisation (Akkermans 1997, 44). The *freedom of establishment* gives religious bodies the right to establish a school and apply for state funding, provided that these groups represent a religious conviction or ideology that is recognised by the state. In this respect, the state recognises all convictions and ideologies which historically have had, or still have, a significant impact on Dutch society. Accordingly, it is for instance possible to establish Catholic, Jewish, Dutch Reformed, Re-Reformed, Islamic or Hindu schools as well as anthroposophical and humanistic schools. However, in 2010, an application for funding a Buddhist school was refused, because the impact of Buddhism on Dutch society was considered to be too marginal (Onderwijsraad 2012).

The *freedom of religious conviction* gives private schools the right to express their religious conviction or ideology in school, whereas state schools have to be strictly neutral in this regard. Private schools can do this for instance by offering confessional RE or by organising compulsory (daily) acts of worship, but also by only appointing teachers with a particular religious background or by refusing students with a different religious background. Contrary to the Belgian situation, faith-based private schools in the Netherlands are thus not accessible for all students. As long as private schools respect basic human rights, they are free in their admission and appointment policy.⁶ The Dutch state does not supervise the way private schools give expression to their religious conviction and accordingly, it does in principle not supervise RE in these schools.⁷ However, as regards all other school subjects, private schools have to comply with the common educational standards and requirements set by the Dutch government.

Finally, the *freedom of organisation* gives private schools the right to organise themselves according to their own principles and ideas, which means that they can for instance make their own rules and regulations regarding daily school life, or choose their own legal organisational form as an association or foundation.

3. The pillarised educational system in a multi-religious society

3.1. Belgium

At present, the subsidised Catholic school network is the largest provider of education in Belgium: in the Flemish Community, 62 per cent of all primary and 74 per cent of all secondary schools are private – mainly Catholic – state-funded schools, with a similar percentage of students; in the French Community, there are 42.⁵ per cent primary and 61 per cent secondary private (mainly Catholic) schools, attended by a similar percentage of students (cf. Table A1 in the Appendix). In theory, other religious communities can also establish state-funded private schools, but in practice, most private schools are Catholic and the number of recognised – and thus subsidised – Protestant, Jewish, non-confessional and Islamic schools⁸ is very low.

From an organisational point of view, Catholic schools are to a large extent centralised. Even though local school boards have some autonomy, the two regional umbrella organisations for Catholic schooling (*Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen* and *Sécrétariat Général de l'Enseignement Catholique en Communautés*

Françaises et Germanophones de Belgique [SeGeC]) are responsible for the general school policy. In each

Community, all the regular Catholic schools for instance share a common mission statement, diverse statements of engagement⁹, a centralised pedagogical service, common syllabuses, joint educational journals, mutual training courses and general guidelines for staff. Most members of the umbrella organisations are laymen, but there are also bishops and vicars in the board and even on the top of management.

In a similar vein, Roman Catholic RE is organised in a centralised way. In the Flemish Community, the 'Recognised Authority for Roman Catholic Education' (*Erkende Instantie Rooms-katholieke godsdienst*), presently chaired by Bishop Johan Bonny, is responsible for the organisation and inspection of Roman Catholic RE, for the appointment of teachers and for the syllabi.¹⁰ Also in the French and German Communities do the bishops have final authority over the subject, is there a common syllabus, and is inspection the same in all Catholic schools.

Because most private schools are Catholic and because exemption for Roman Catholic RE is not allowed in these schools, this is the main RE subject in Belgium. In the Flemish Community, almost 80 per cent of all secondary school students take Roman Catholic RE, mainly in Catholic schools. In primary schools, we observe similar tendencies and also in the French and German Communities is Roman Catholic RE the main RE subject.

For a long time, Catholic schools were schools *from* and *for* Catholics: the majority of the Belgian population belonged to the Catholic Church, and it was considered obvious that education would be in the Catholic tradition. This kind of education was quite evident for a long period, but last decades, we can observe a change as a result of secularisation and increasing religious diversity. Even though most students in Catholic schools are still baptised,¹¹ the number of practicing students is very low¹² and most students in Catholic schools do not identify (any longer) with Catholicism: 48.9 per cent identify with Roman Catholicism, 10.1 per cent with another Christian denomination, 9.4 per cent with Islam, 0.7 per cent with another non-Christian religion, 22.4 per cent with a secular worldview and 8.5 per cent are indifferent.¹⁸ As said by Derroitte et al. (2014, 47, 48), 'Even within Catholic schools many of the students do not consider themselves Catholic anymore, even if they are baptised Catholics. Practicing students belong to the absolute minority even within their own schools.'

As a result of the large number of Catholic schools, most students are enrolled in these schools, which are often chosen for practical reasons such as (perceived) quality of education, school climate, neighbourhood, studies offered and the overall image of the school.¹⁴ The Catholic identity, which was a few decades ago a decisive factor in the school choice and was one of the markers of the pillarised society, is for most parents no longer important. For that reason, we can speak about 'mental depillarisation': even though the Belgian education system is in a structural way still pillarised ('structural

pillarisation'), many students, parents, but also teachers and school principals, no longer identify with Catholicism.

As a result of this mental depillarisation, there have been some debates about the 'Catholic' identity of the Catholic schools. In order to avoid further eroding of this identity, without 'reconfessionalising' (Catholic schools are schools from and for Catholics), Catholic schools in the Flemish Community are presently called *Catholic schools of dialogue* (katholieke dialoogscholen): schools wherein students are challenged *to think about their own identity and to dialogue about this identity with fellow students*, whatever their religious affiliation may be. The Catholic school of dialogue welcomes students of different religions and worldviews, although the Bible, and in particular the person of Jesus Christ, is still the basis for its pedagogical project. Accordingly, a Catholic school is identified as 'a community of work and life, where people together experience the Christian faith day by day [...]' (*Mission statement of Catholic Education in Flanders*)¹⁵

In order to experience this Christian faith, Catholic schools do not only organise compulsory Roman Catholic RE classes, but also organise moments of prayer and worship services. In some schools, these religious activities are obligatory, but this is not the case in all schools. Moreover, in order to meet the religious diversity in a positive way, there is also attention for the accommodation of non-Christian students. This can, for instance, mean that chapels are transformed into multi-confessional prayer rooms; that Muslims can take optional Islamic RE classes (in addition to the compulsory Roman Catholic RE classes); and that the wearing of non-Christian religious symbols such as the veil is allowed.¹⁶

3.2. The Netherlands

As in Belgium, the majority of Dutch students are enrolled in private, faith-based schools. In the school year 2013–2014, 29.6 per cent of the students in primary education attended a state school, 33.0 per cent a Catholic school, 26.8 per cent a Protestant school and 10.3 per cent another private school.¹⁷ For secondary education, the respective figures are 26.1, 25.2, 21.7 and 26.8 per cent (cf. Table A1 in the Appendix). This clearly shows that private, faith-based schools dominate the educational scene in the Netherlands up to the present day. However, this is basically a numerical dominance, because faith-based schools have to comply with the educational standards and requirements set by the Dutch government and are thus limited when it comes to designing their own curricula or writing their own syllabuses. As we explained above, the autonomy of state-funded, faith-based schools is mainly restricted to the way they express their religious conviction or ideology in school (freedom of religious conviction).

As a result of the Dutch *dual system*, RE in the Netherlands is always confessional. While RE is no compulsory subject in state schools, in faith-based, private schools, it is one of the means of expressing the school's religious conviction or ideology. However, this does not mean that state schools do not pay any attention to religion and worldview. Within primary education, all schools – state as well as private are required by law to inform students in an objective and neutral way about the major religions that are present in Dutch society (Westerman 2001). However, the law does not state that this requires a separate subject. As a result, in most primary schools, religious topics are only marginally discussed as part of other school subjects like history or geography. As far as secondary education is concerned, the

aforementioned requirement does not exist, which means that in secondary state schools, attention for religion and worldview is scarce if not completely absent. Hence, RE as a full-blown, separate school subject only exists in private, faith-based schools where it expresses the religious conviction of the school and is thus confessional and mandatory.

However, especially among the younger generation, religious disaffiliation is huge in the Netherlands (De Hart 2014, 45–68; Bernts and Berghuijs 2016, 23, 24). Given the numerical dominance of faith-based schools in the Dutch educational system, a large number of students attending these schools is thus not religious or has no religious background. For instance in 2010, Van Dijk-Groeneboer et al. (2010), 38–40) estimated that of all Dutch youngsters between 15 and 25 years old, only 7 per cent is Muslim, 10 per cent Catholic, 10 per cent Protestant and 10 per cent belongs to one of the smaller orthodox Protestant churches or has another religious background. These figures are far below the aforementioned 25.1 and 21.1 per cent of Dutch students that, respectively, attended a Catholic or Protestant secondary school in the school year 2014–2015.

In line with this secularisation of the student population in most faith-based schools, the religious affiliation of the school is also less important when it comes to the reasons parents have for sending their children to a faith-based school. Instead, factors like the geographical location of the school, the supposed quality of the school or the atmosphere in the school are considered more important (Vreeburg 1993, 100–104); only parents who send their children to a mainline or an orthodox Protestant school also consider the religious affiliation of the school of importance (Dijkstra and Miedema 2003, 71–74). And according to a large-scale survey on religion conducted in 2015, most Dutch citizens nowadays even prefer to send their children to a state school instead of a private, faith-based school (Bernts and Berghuijs 2016, 45, 46). Hence, the labels ‘mental depillarisation’ and ‘structural pillarisation’, which we already used to characterise the Belgian situation, can also be applied to the Dutch situation. Like in Belgium, faith-based schools in the Netherlands clearly experience a tension: established on the basis of a clear religious conviction, their population – students as well as parents and staff – have become increasingly secular. This tension has been addressed in the past decades in two ways. On the one hand, the influence of religion has significantly declined in most Catholic and mainstream Protestant schools.¹⁸ Apart from the fact that RE, which is then called ‘worldview education’, is still part of the curriculum, expressions of religion or of the religious conviction of the school are nearly absent. As a result, there is almost no distinction between state schools and these more mainstream faith-based schools. On the other hand, some faith-based schools more or less oppose secular culture and re-emphasise their religious identity, while recruiting specific segments of the Dutch population. This is for instance common in schools affiliated with the smaller, orthodox Protestant churches and in Islamic schools. In the Netherlands, therefore (and rather different from Belgium), also the field of private, faith-based education itself is very diverse today. It ranges from a large number of schools which are only nominally affiliated with a religious tradition to a smaller number of schools which still allow their religious conviction to influence all aspects of school life (Vreeburg 1997; cf. also Miedema et al. 2013).

4. From theory to practice: challenges and present discussions

4.1. Belgium

Since the official launch of the 'Catholic school of dialogue' in the media (June 2016), there is a heated debate about these 'new' Catholic schools in Belgium. On the one hand, they are criticised from a more 'traditional', right-wing point of view and particularly the Flemish Nationalist party (NVA) is afraid that with the Catholic schools of dialogue, the 'Catholic' and thus also 'Flemish' school identity will disappear. On the other hand, more 'progressive', liberal and/or left-wing people and political parties criticise the Catholic school of dialogue, because the new school policy seems to be nothing more than a strategical manoeuvre to attract more Muslims and thus keep the monopoly position of Catholic schools intact. Moreover, if some Catholic schools will organise extra RE classes for Muslims, if they accommodate religious diversity and if they are open for all students, why should we still label them as *Catholic*? Wouldn't it be more realistic, less expensive and more efficient to have *one* centralised, non-confessional and depillarised education system, these critics wondered in several Flemish newspapers.¹⁹

A related controversial issue is the subject Roman Catholic RE. At present, this subject is compulsory for all students in Catholic schools, although it is often no longer in accordance with their religious conviction. In order to meet the present religious plurality in the classroom, the syllabuses for Roman Catholic RE are since 2000 no longer catechetical, but are instead organised in an open and pluralistic way. However, notwithstanding this interreligious and dialogical approach, Jesus is still the 'point of reference' and 'other religions' are always presented from the perspective of the 'own' Catholic tradition. Besides, the subject is, institutionally, still a *confessional* subject: in order to teach it, the teacher needs a mandate from the Catholic Church, and the Belgian bishops are responsible for syllabuses, teacher appointment, and inspection.

This way of organising RE is disputed for several reasons. First, there is a lack of 'religious literacy' among students – even with regard to the 'own' Catholic tradition. In 2010, the former Archbishop, André Léonard, put this aptly in a newspaper interview: 'Most students have [Roman Catholic] RE at school, but after all these years of so-called religious education, they know far too little.'²⁰ Six years later, bishop Bonny suited the action to the word and established a group of experts which is presently working on an actualisation of the syllabi. In 2018–2019, this work should result in a 'canon' which can be used by teachers and students and wherein, for instance, information about the sacraments; the difference between canonisation and beatification; and the importance of quotes such as 'ecce homo' will be collected.²¹

This decision to make RE classes 'more religious' again and to focus more on the 'own' Christian tradition is, within the present Belgian RE policy, quite obvious: if Roman Catholic RE is on the regular curriculum, the least we can expect is that students have some basic knowledge about Christianity and Roman Catholicism. It is, however, questionable whether this emphasis on Roman Catholicism and Christianity will be sufficient. Since Belgian society – and thus also the RE classroom – is characterised by increasing religious diversity, a minimal form of religious literacy with regard to *other* traditions is at least equally important.

This brings us to a second point of critique: given the fact of religious diversity, is organising *confessional* RE still the most desirable way of organising RE in Belgium today? Is the main task of RE education *into* religion, or should its main task be educating *about* religion – i.e. educating about *different* religions

and worldviews? Actually, RE in Catholic as well as in state schools in Belgium suffers from the same deficits: every student is mainly educated in *one* (not necessarily his/her own) tradition and RE is always organised in a denominational and (semi-)confessional way. It is, however, questionable whether this way of organising RE is still desirable today, particularly when fostering authentic dialogue between different religious and cultural groups is one of its core aims (cf. Council of Europe 2004, 2008; OSCE 2007; Jackson 2014a).

A related problem is that RE classes are autonomously organised and controlled by the recognised religions and that the syllabi need no approval from the state. Particularly for Islamic RE, this is problematic, because many teachers do not have a required degree and/or do not speak French/Dutch fluently; the curricula have some important deficits; textbooks are imported from abroad (Turkey); and the number of inspectors is insufficient.²² But in fact, this whole RE policy is questionable: do we really want that RE classes are autonomously organised by the religious communities, without any state control? Or is a minimal form of control required? Is it opportune to leave the aims and content of the RE classes up to the religious communities? Or should the *state* design a basic curriculum and formulate final achievements with regard to RE?²³

For these and other reasons, there is since 2009 the proposal to introduce a new, independent and compulsory subject about religions, ethics, philosophy and citizenship, called 'LEF' ('Levensbeschouwing, Ethiek, Filosofie'), in *all* schools in the Flemish Community (Loobuyck and Franken 2011; Franken and Loobuyck 2013; Loobuyck 2014). Even though there are many pedagogical, societal, legal and practical reasons for the introduction of a non-confessional RE subject in all regular schools, this proposal is very controversial and particularly the recognised religions and the Catholic school network in Flanders are opposed to it. This is one of the reasons why there is, almost ten years after the LEF-proposal, still a status quo as regards RE in the Flemish Community.

In the French Community, things are different. Since 2016–2017, the traditional RE classes are reduced there from two hours to one hour in state schools and in some non-confessional private schools. During the hour freed up, a new subject 'Education to Philosophy and Citizenship' (EPC) is scheduled. In Catholic schools and in some other non-confessional private schools, there is no separate subject EPC, but the aims of the subject are integrated in other subjects such as history, languages and RE. However, in spite of the noble intentions, this new system is heavily criticised²⁴ and its implementation does not go smoothly.

4.2. The Netherlands

For several decades, a debate is going on in the Netherlands about article 23 of the Dutch constitution, which enables the establishment of state-funded, faith-based schools. Critics of faith-based education are strongly opposed to this article, because in their view state-funded, faith-based education for instance violates the separation of church and state and the neutrality of the state; is no longer desired by the majority of the population; results in social and ideological segregation; and interferes with the autonomy of the child (Vermeulen 2006). However, opposing faith-based education is not identical to pleading for the abolishment of article 23 altogether. At present, several politicians (mainly liberals and social-democrats) plead for an expansion, rather than for a restriction, of the freedom of education. They

want to eliminate the legal requirement that private schools can only be funded if they represent a religious conviction or ideology with a significant impact on Dutch society. Until now, this requirement makes it impossible to establish a school and apply for state funding solely on the basis of, for instance, a distinctive pedagogical approach. Accordingly, this requirement constrains the freedom of education, these politicians argue. Abolishing this requirement and thus also expanding the freedom of education is also in line with the advice of the Education Council of the Netherlands (Onderwijsraad 2012), although Christian political parties are strongly opposed to this reinterpretation of article 23.

Because the current debate in the Netherlands more or less centres around this reinterpretation of article 23, there is less debate concerning RE. This smaller interest in RE is also the result of some developments within RE itself. As in Belgium, RE in the Netherlands is still confessional, which means that it is organised by the churches or other recognised religious/ideological organisations and is not the responsibility of the state – although the state bears all RE-related costs like for instance teacher salaries. Accordingly, there are no national requirements with regard to RE in the Netherlands. RE is not considered a regular school subject, but a subject which contributes to the religious socialisation of students. However, due to the ongoing secularisation of the school population, this aim of religious socialisation is no longer feasible – at least not in the majority of Catholic and mainline Protestant schools. Therefore, the nature and character of RE within these aforementioned schools profoundly changed during the last three decades and developed into what is now called ‘worldview education’. The aim of worldview education is no longer to educate students *in* a particular religious tradition, but to help them develop a personal worldview or philosophy of life – an aim which is since 1998 also officially endorsed by the Dutch Catholic School Council (Vermeer 2013, 87–89).²⁵ In most faith-based schools, RE thus has been accommodated to secular society, which is probably one of the reasons why it did not become a subject of much controversy.

Although in most Catholic and mainstream Protestant schools, RE is officially (*de jure*) still a confessional subject, in fact (*de facto*) it has been de-confessionalised and developed into a ‘secular’ subject with a strong emphasis on the identity formation of students (Alii 2009, 177). However, an important side effect of this shift has been a gradual loss of systematic attention for organised religions and worldviews and their historical development, as Vreeburg (1993, 275, 276) already noted in 1993. Initially, the underlying idea of worldview education was to make students familiar not only with the main Christian tradition, but also with other religious traditions, by showing them how these traditions address the existential questions basic to the human condition. However, it appeared that many students were not that much interested in exploring existential questions and did not recognise the existential questions discussed in class as having anything to do with their own lives. Consequently, in many RE (i.e. worldview education) classes, the emphasis gradually shifted from showing how religious traditions provide answers to ‘universal’ existential questions to exploring what students themselves consider important in life and who they want to be. No doubt, this is an important educational aim, but the emphasis on this aim resulted in numerous RE classes wherein religious traditions as organised worldviews are hardly discussed, at least not in a systematic and academic way. A cursory look at a widely used textbook for worldview education in Dutch RE classes, viz. *Standpunt*,²⁶ for instance, shows that, in the majority of RE classes, religious traditions and secular worldviews are merely discussed in

an eclectic and fragmentary manner. This is a regrettable fact, especially because worldview education is not necessarily devoid of religious and theological content. As argued for instance by Van der Kooij, de Ruyter, and Miedema (2013), worldview education also implies, or even demands, that students learn about organised religions and secular worldviews as well.

For several reasons, this loss of systematic attention for organised religions and worldviews can be considered problematic. First, it denies the interests of students. Although the views and expectations of students regarding RE have not received much scholarly attention in the Netherlands, the few studies that have been conducted all point at the same direction: students find it important to acquire knowledge *about* religious traditions and prefer a more objective approach to RE, instead of a so-called education *from* approach wherein religious and theological content is more or less artificially related to their personal lives (see, for instance, Ter Avest et al. 2008; Bertram-Troost et al. 2009; Van der Tuin 2009; Van Dijk-Groeneboer and Brijan 2013). Second, having systematic knowledge *about* different religious traditions today is an almost necessary condition for being able to understand present-day multi-religious society and global politics (Meijer 2011). And, thirdly, acquiring knowledge *about* different religious traditions is also important for fostering citizenship and the social integration of students. Within the culturally and religiously plural context of Dutch society, promoting values like tolerance and non-discrimination, and rejecting intolerance, which in the Netherlands is seen as an important aspect of citizenship education (Dijkstra 2006), also calls for systematic knowledge of different religious traditions. Even though most Dutch students attend RE classes, they remain rather ignorant concerning religions and worldviews. To a certain extent, this is because most Dutch youths are no longer socialised in a specific religious tradition by their parents, but also the aforementioned loss of content in RE classes is an important cause here. Out of concern for this growing religious illiteracy, in the summer of 2016, several scholars from religious studies departments in the Netherlands made a public appeal to introduce 'Religious Studies' as a secular subject in state as well as private, faith-based schools in the Netherlands. Having knowledge about religion is a necessary tool for understanding today's globalised world, these scholars argued. Their appeal received quite some attention in Dutch media and was, in the beginning of 2017, followed by the publication of a proposal for a core curriculum for RE in both private (faith-based) and state schools (Davidsen et al. 2017). The publication of this proposal signifies the latest phase in the discussion regarding faith-based education and RE in the Netherlands.

6. RE in a pillarised, diversified society: future prospect

Today, the RE system in Belgium and in the Netherlands is an anachronism that is no longer adapted to the present educational and societal needs. As a result of structural pillarisation on the one hand, and mental depillarisation on the other, faith-based schools often struggle with their religious identity and thus also with their RE classes. Because the organisation of mono-confessional and/or catechetical RE is no longer in accordance with the religious background of the school population, faith-based schools modified their RE policy in several ways. A first strategy was the evolution from confessional RE to a more open, inclusive and dialogical form of 'semi-confessional' RE: in Belgium, Catholic RE has become more open and dialogical and also in the Netherlands, we can, in many faith-based schools, observe a shift from 'religious education' to 'worldview education'. Quite often, however, this well-intended strategy

has led to a decline of religious literacy among students and to a further erosion of the Christian identity of faith-based schools.

As a response to these problems, some faith-based schools re-emphasise their Christian identity, which means, among others, a return from 'worldview education' to 'Christian education', and/or a renewed emphasis on the content and importance of the Christian tradition. However, even though there is indeed an urgent need for religious literacy, and even though the Christian faith, for historical and cultural reasons, rightfully deserves more attention in RE than other religions, this policy is probably not the best way out. The main problem is that re-emphasising the Christian identity is no longer in accordance with the present societal and educational context, which is quite different from the 1960s societal and educational context. In order to improve students' understanding of religions and worldviews within the present pillarised education system, knowledge about religious facts (*le fait religieux*) could be integrated in regular subjects such as history, languages and geography. This is for instance common in Catholic schools of the French Community in Belgium and also in the Netherlands, where 'geestelijke stromingen' is often integrated in different school subjects in primary education. However, although this minimal form of state-controlled education about religion is far better than no education about religion at all, the integration of 'religious facts' in existing school subjects is not so evident in practice. As Cush (2007, 226) rightly states, '[a]ddressing religion within the context of other school subjects will always be second best' because there are at least three problems with this inclusion of RE in other disciplines: (1) this approach may lead to a one-sided or limited view on religion; (2) the sheer volume of the content requires a separate school subject; and (3) in order to make RE successful, we need specialist teachers, which are trained in religious studies and not exclusively in other subjects (Cush 2007, 223, 224). Another, and related argument that is not explicitly mentioned by Cush, is that there is often a discrepancy between theory and practice: in the Netherlands for instance, 'geestelijke stromingen' is in most primary schools officially included in other subjects, but in practice, there is often no education about religion at all, with an impoverished religious literacy among students as a consequence. Against this background, we propose that the Belgian and Dutch state take responsibility for RE by organising a separate non-confessional RE subject (education about religion) for *all* students and in *all* regular schools, without the possibility to opt out. In addition, the state should design national standards for RE, in order to ensure that religions and worldviews in regular schools are studied in a systematic and academic way. In this regard, non-confessional RE, which should be taught by expert teachers trained in the field of religious studies, is not different from for instance history, biology and geography.

However, our proposal does not necessarily imply a merely cognitive approach to RE. Also in compulsory non-confessional RE with an emphasis on learning about religions and worldviews, students may still be encouraged to reflect on their own values and beliefs and to develop a personal philosophy of life. Keeping in mind the freedom of education and the related right to establish faith-based schools, these latter schools can, in addition to this non-confessional subject, still organise (state subsidised) confessional RE. This kind of RE should, however, not *necessarily* be organised, nor should it be *compulsory* for all students. In order to guarantee the freedom of organisation and education for schools *and* for students/parents, faith-based schools should be free to decide whether this kind of extra-

curricular RE is compulsory or not, taking into account the present needs and wishes of the students and parents.

This combination of voluntary confessional RE and compulsory non-confessional RE as a state organised subject *about* religion might also be promising for state schools. In the Netherlands, these schools are presently obliged to organise confessional RE when a number of parents require this, but in addition to these optional, extra-curricular RE classes, there is no regular subject about religion. In Belgium, by contrast, only *confessional* RE classes are on the regular curriculum in state schools, but the organisation of these classes raises many practical and content-related problems. One of the main problems is the lack of state control, but also the segregation of students according to their religious background is, in a context of religious plurality, objectionable, particularly if we agree that some core aims of twenty-first-century RE are 'to cultivate reciprocity, sensitivity and empathy and to combat prejudice, intolerance, bigotry and racism' (Jackson 2014b, 137). In addition, there is an urgent need for 'knowledge and understanding of the main religions and non-religious convictions in the world and of their role in society' (Jackson 2014b, 137), and in order to realise this, a model of integrative and mandatory education about religion, both in state schools and in private schools is, in the Belgian and Dutch context, more promising than the present RE model, wherein qualitative, state-supervised education about religion is lacking, with far-going consequences for students and society.

Notes

1. For the Netherlands, the process of pillarisation and the first signs of de-pillarisation between 1917 and 1967 are described in the seminal work of Lijphart (1968) in which four closed social groupings in Dutch society are identified: Calvinists, Catholics, liberals and socialists. For Belgium, the work of Huyse (1987) is significant in this regard.
2. For infrastructure and working costs, there are some financial differences between primary and secondary schools and between the different communities.
3. Anglicanism is only organised in state schools in the Flemish Community, not in the French and German Communities.
4. In the Flemish Community, non-confessional ethics is organised by the non-confessional organisation of freethinkers. In the French and German Communities, this subject is organised by the state.
5. Secular private schools are for instance private schools with a particular pedagogical ethos, such as Freinet or Steiner schools.
6. Faith-based private schools are for instance not allowed to refuse a homosexual teacher on the sole fact that he

or she is gay. This is seen as a violation of the principle of non-discrimination laid down in article 1 of the Dutch

constitution. However, faith-based private schools are allowed to refuse students and teachers from a different

faith or require that they do not display their religious conviction in school. In 2011 for instance, the board of a

Catholic secondary school prohibited a Muslim student to wear a headscarf in school and was not denied this

right in the following lawsuit filed by the student's parents.

7. In the wake of the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, the Dutch government ordered the Dutch School

Inspectorate to investigate whether RE in Islamic schools poses a threat to the Dutch democratic order. Since then

supervising RE in faith-based, private schools have become a more or less regular task of the school inspectorate,

although several legal scholars claim that this is a violation of the freedom of education (Meijer 2006, 23–34).

8. In 2015, only four Islamic schools (three primary schools and one secondary school – all in the region of Brussels-

Capital and under legislation of the French Community) were subsidised and in 2016, the first subsidised Islamic

school in the Flemish Community opened its doors.

9. These are for instance engagements with regard to food policy (no soft drinks), ecology (promoting sustainable

buildings; stimulating recycling...), etc.

10. The syllabus for Roman Catholic RE is the same in private and in state schools.

11. In the last two years of secondary education (16–18 year old) in Catholic schools, 86 per cent of the students are

still baptised, but this number decreases among younger students: in primary Catholic schools, only 68,5 per cent

of the students are baptised.

12 <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/onderzoek-katholieke-identiteit-scholen/>

13. <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/onderzoek-katholieke-identiteit-scholen/>

14. http://www.onderwijsvaniedereen.be/bijlagen/PaginasPisa2012_SchoolkeuzeOuders.pdf

15. <http://www.katholiekonderwijs.vlaanderen/over-ons/opdrachtsverklaring-van-het-katholiek-onderwijsvlaanderen>.

16. In Belgium, wearing religious symbols in schools is a contested issue, particularly in Flanders, where this is, since

2014, not allowed in schools of the Flemish Community ('Gemeenschapsonderwijs'). Quite soon after this decision,

however, the Council of State judged that this decision was illegitimate (RvS, arrest nr. 228.748; RvS, arrest nr.

228.752). In theory, private schools are free to decide whether they allow the veil or not, but in practice, many

Catholic schools have a general ban on head gear. As a result, wearing the veil is in practice often not allowed there.

17. 'Other private schools' are for instance Jewish, Islamic and Hindu schools, schools affiliated to the smaller,

mainly orthodox Protestant churches in the Netherlands as well as anthroposophical and humanistic schools.

Unfortunately, there are no separate statistics for these different branches of private schools.

18. Another sign of the declining influence of religion in Catholic and mainstream Protestant schools is the merger in

2015 of the umbrella organisations for Catholic and mainstream Protestant education into one overall organisation

for Catholic and Protestant education called *Verus*, while the more orthodox Protestant schools remained

independent and still have their own umbrella organisations.

19. E.g. 'Katholiek onderwijsnet is achterhaald' ['Catholic Education is outdated'], *De Standaard* 23-05-2016.

20. 'Naar "zuiverdere" godsdienstlessen' [Towards 'purer' religious education classes], *De Standaard* 10-05-2010.

21. 'Godsdienstles wordt opnieuw religieuzer' ['Religious education classes will become more religious again'], *De*

Morgen 30-08-2016.

22. See Franken 2017 for Islamic RE in Belgium.

23. Very recently (October 2017), there was a discussion about this issue in Flanders. According to the Socialist and

Green parties, the state should have more control over RE and should, accordingly, design a core curriculum for

RE. As said by the Christian Democrats, however, such a policy would lead to an infringement of the freedom of

religion and education. Hence the Flemish Minister of Education, who is a member of the Christian Democrat Party,

decided that the religious communities (and not the state) will keep their responsibility over RE in the future. Only

when RE is not in line with human rights and the rights of the child, should it be possible for the state to intervene.

It is, however, not clear what this means in practice.

24. The main criticisms are related to practical problems, such as scheduling and combining different schools (which is now a bigger problem than in the previous system). Another discussion concerns the teacher training and the requirements to teach the new subject EPC. Last, but not least, there is, from the Catholic side, the critique that the new system favours state schools in a financial way, which is unconstitutional. For this reason, the SeGeC went to the Constitutional Court, with the requirement to abolish the new decrees concerning RE in the French Community.

25. Dutch faith-based schools are fairly autonomous with respect to RE. Umbrella organisations like the Dutch Catholic School Council, which in 2015 merged with the Protestant School Council into one organisation (cf. note 18), only offer suggestions to schools concerning RE, but they do not issue specific syllabi nor do they endorse one national Catholic or Protestant curriculum for RE. As a result, the actual practice of RE in Catholic and mainline Protestant schools is very diverse and there is also no national exam for RE (cf. also Bertram-Troost and Visser 2017). This again shows that RE is not in all respects an ordinary school subject.

26. *Standpunt*, or 'Point of view' in English, is the most widely used textbook for RE in the lower grades of secondary education next to the use of material teachers designed themselves (Bertram-Troost and Visser 2017, 13, 14).